The SAD ADVENTURERS

MARYSE RUTLEDGE

Class PZ3

Book .H1338
Sa

Copyright No. Copy 2

COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT.

THE SAD ADVENTURERS

A NOVEL

BY

MARYSE RUTLEDGE

Author of "Children of Fate"

From M. R. to "Hale."

NEW YORK
FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY
MCMXXIV

Copy 2.

PZ3
H1338
Sa
Copy 2

Copyright, 1924, by
FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY
Copyright, 1921, 1922, 1923, 1924, by
MARYSE RUTLEDGE

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

SEP -2 '24
©CLA800643

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Honeymoon	1
II.	Sad Adventurers	26
III.	Big Game	63
IV.	The Lost Verona	114
V.	Brassington Hall	157
VI.	Something Cheap	197
VII.	Glamour	230
VIII.	Home	276

THE SAD ADVENTURERS

CHAPTER I

HONEYMOON

I

SHE was unbelievably happy. It was like getting up early on a beautiful morning and looking forward to a day of gifts, of surprises; a day that need never end. This was the way one should feel, of course, with a new and wonderful husband, and a new and wonderful life unfolding its brilliant vistas far into desirable lands. Europe! She was going to Europe to live—she, Anita Moffett of Stamford—no, Anita Brassington-Welsh from now on. Forever and ever.

Somewhere, among the shifting pattern of the crowd in the cavernous dusk of the pier, her mother and friends were straining to catch a last glimpse of her. As they saw her now on the verge of departure, so would they think of her for months to come—radiant, fortunate, sheltered by the tall

soldierly figure of her husband. But would they ever discover her where she stood on the upper deck leaning over the rail with Hal beside her?

She seemed already removed from them, a stranger about to sail away on this immense exciting ship; a little woman of golden lights, her wide lips parted, her green eyes brilliant with adventure, and the gay green of her new travelling costume springing like a young plant in the sun. A bunch of violets at her breast made her aware of farewells.

It was good to feel this man at her side; to feel so close to her his ruddy face with the dark, dashing sweep of moustache, the smart black and white check of cap and coat.

"There's the mater, Nita, on the left next to the scrawny old bird with the flag. See her?" He was gleeful as a boy. "Hello there—hello!" His voice boomed out.

"Where, Hal?—I don't see—" She was crushing her poor violets against the railing. There was something poignant about those upturned faces below; the sway of arms and heads, the flutter of handkerchiefs; of flags like leaves in a wind trying to be bright, trying to speak, trying to express all that had not been said. It must be hard to be left behind. Such a queer little pain like hot wires slowly twisted through her heart. Hal's big hand rested on hers. It only made the pain worse.

Yes, there was her mother in the grey suit she had bought especially to see them off. But how small

and lonely she looked, how unlike herself. It was the grey, of course. The first time her mother had worn any color since her father's death.

And there was Miss Lacy. They would go back to Stamford together on the four o'clock train. Oh, and there were the Lucas girls, and the Burlins, at whose house in New York she had met Hal—was it only two months ago?

Her dear, brave mother trying to smile.

Smile! Wave back at the little group. She would see them again soon. She would come back. And then her mother would visit them as soon as they were settled in Brassington Hall. What fun that would be! Silly of her to want to cry.

"Oh, I say, Nita, buck up, dear girl. Everything's quite all right, you know." He was bending over her. His arm was around her.

She knew that. Everything was gloriously right. But it was as if a thread so slender, so fragile that she had never before realised its existence, had thickened into a chain of many links fastening her to that shore, to the house in Stamford which she could see every time she shut her eyes; fastening her to her mother and to something more intangible which she had not valued enough—her youth. Never the same again—never.

Voices were flung like streamers from decks to wharfs, enclosing them all in a web of farewells that spun thinner and thinner, breaking, strand by strand, as with a din of whistles and steam, the rattle

of chains, and pound of engines, the inexorable moment was upon them.

"Good-bye—good-bye—be sure to write——"

"Good-bye—best of luck——"

"Good-bye—don't forget——"

Slowly they were moving, backing out. The dark water widened.

"Off at last!" Hal sounded relieved. Of course it wasn't his country, his mother, his friends.

On the open end of the pier, coloured specks clung under the hot June sun. Smaller and smaller, dwindling——

And here was she standing in her new clothes beside her new husband, crying like a baby. Not fair to Hal. There was so much to see, too—the harbour, the boats, the skyline in that vivid morning light. Joy came back to her, curling her light lashes, her lips. "Oh, Hal, it's wonderful!"

As she trotted along the deck, she was conscious of eyes looking her over, looking Hal over. She lifted her head to sparkle at him, and felt him sleek and glistening beside her. He had a way of projecting himself into the foreground of a picture. There was something large and lavish about him, a sonorous quality that carried, especially when he was explaining things to her.

"Friend of mine, Lord Bardell, crossed on her maiden trip. He told me——"

Perhaps his voice was a trifle loud. A tall woman with a hooked nose and dangling earrings was star-

ing at them and whispering to her companion, a stiff pinkish man. They looked English.

"Hal, aren't those people English?"

But he had swaggered ahead to talk to the deck steward. You hardly noticed his slight limp except when he was tired. And anyway, she reflected, a game leg was very distinguished.

Trunks—people; people—trunks, in the narrow corridors down which presently he led her. Smells of salt, and rubber, and fresh paint, and a dull throbbing of engines.

She was glad to get back to their cabin with its real beds, and the polished gleam of its adjoining bathroom. The porthole on the promenade deck was open. It was all so light and large and gay.

How good he was, how thoughtful! The intimacy of the room quivered through her. His trunk, her trunk, their bags together, and soon all their belongings out and mingled on the dressing table.

He stood beaming down at her. "Jolly, isn't it?"

Someone knocked on the door. He laughed as she started away from him. It was only the steward with boxes of flowers, baskets of fruit, books, telegrams. What fun it was! She saw herself in the mirror of the wardrobe, a flushed, happy little woman, slim with the promise of gracious curves, golden-green as a jonquil in the sun, her wide red lips winging upwards.

And now the door was shut. A great shyness came into her heart, a tenderness that exalted and

humbled her. She turned and ran to him, and hid her face in the rough-feeling stuff of his coat. He smelt faintly of tobacco, of leather.

She clung to him fiercely, closely. "Please love me—please always love me, Hal."

"God knows I love you. If I didn't—" How strange his voice sounded, low and almost stern. She raised her head. He was looking over her, beyond her. His arms around her tightened.

She wasn't afraid. All their life together——

2

She wondered the next day how long that life would be! If only those wicked clamps would loosen their hold on her poor head. They seemed fixed at the back, adjusted to a maximum of torture, as if some malignant spirit were tightening the screw, slowly squeezing her brain to a pulp.

The rest of her, attached to that tortured head, lay limply on the bed, aware of every movement, every sound. Hal, poor dear, meant to be quiet. But he was such a big, hearty creature, and he had so very much to tell her about the extraordinary weather, the jolly good fellows he was meeting, and how he wished she felt better, and wouldn't she drink just a wee nippie of champagne?

She could hardly open her eyes to see him as he stood there in the mornings scrubbed and shining, his splendid moustache setting off his high colour.

When he bent to kiss her, it made her a little dizzy because always about him there seemed to linger whiffs from the smoking room.

He spent a great deal of his time in the smoking room.

She liked to lie with closed eyes during the long evenings thinking of him amusing himself among men. When the pain in her head receded for a while, she drifted into such beautiful dreams of the future. Could she ever live up to Brassington Hall? If his father and mother had lived, would they have loved her? She was so much younger than Hal. But then twenty-four wasn't so very young. And after all—forty-four wasn't really old.

To the lazy dip and roll of the ship, and the sound of voices outside, she evolved pictures, images of herself, presiding over that ancient pile of stones which stood for Hal's family. How little, after all, he had told her of himself! But she knew. She knew already, in her heart, the fair English countryside. It flung out its smooth lawns and terraces before her; its English roses bloomed in the gardens, and there were deer and peacocks, and she and Hal, arm in arm, walked down endless avenues hedged with yew.

And then the pain would come back, and Hal would creak in, sit down on the edge of the bed, light a cigarette, and talk about a man called de Lancey Kane, with whom he had grown very chummy the first day out. He was always talking

about this Mr. Kane, who, it seemed, came from the Middle West, and spent most of his time crossing and recrossing the ocean just for the fun of it.

A singular manner of enjoying oneself, she thought. But if Hal liked him——

Hal did like him. A good sport, a great hand at bridge, and yesterday he had won the pool. He and Hal seemed always to be playing games of some sort. There were little parties in the cabins of other men, and Hal would come jubilantly back to her displaying his winnings.

"Four pounds. Not so bad—what? Here, old girl, they're for you to buy something with in Paris."

"You'll spoil me, Hal." But she liked being spoiled.

Then suddenly late one afternoon, the pain in her head went away, and she decided to get up for dinner. She was absurdly weak, and, dear me, how pale she looked! Perhaps the tiniest touch of rouge would help. It made her feel so deliciously guilty to be putting on rouge. But yes, it really was becoming, and with that borrowed brightness, her eyes could afford their languor. A white dress to-night, the soft chiffon one that showed up the golden lights of her hair. Hal would be pleased——

He was pleased. He stopped quite still in the doorway, his dark eyes twinkling under his tufted brows. "Oh, I say, you do look rippin', my dear!"

He was handsome enough, himself, in his evening clothes, a long-limbed, highly polished, highly

coloured military gentleman. And, even if she did feel a bit wobbly on her feet, delight flowed through her as, gallantly, he flung about her shoulders the soft white cape which completed her costume, and told her again how absolutely topping she looked.

Together they went out into the clear evening air. She would have liked to linger on deck watching the deepening blue of sky and sea, the long glistening rolls of water edged with foam. But a cocktail, Hal said, was just the thing. And a cocktail seemed inevitably associated in his mind with the pleasant company of Mr. de Lancey Kane. Apparently the smoking room was the one place where this new friend might be found.

Hal, with the genial spark of fellowship in his eye, guided her there. And sure enough Mr. Kane was waiting.

She did not like Mr. Kane. He was too perfect, too slim and glistening. She didn't like the shape or colour of his eyes which lay like oysters in a shallow plate. One felt the ice under them, and his skin was the bluish white of a shell. Nor did she like the feel of his long white hand. He subtly missed being obtrusively common. It was because he really wasn't that one wondered where he had come from and how he had managed to acquire such pleasant ways.

He was pleasant, very pleasant, with just the right note of diffidence in his welcome. "How delighted I am to meet you at last, Mrs. Brassington-Welsh,"

he said. "Our little circle is now complete. I'm sure the Major agrees with me."

But "the Major" was too busy ordering the drinks to agree with anyone except the steward, whose chummy attitude implied, she thought, that it was Hal's magnificent custom to pay. It became him and it evidently suited Mr. Kane.

"Here's to my wife, the finest little woman in the world." Hal raised his glass. "I'm a devilish lucky man—eh what, Kane? Nothing like her in England."

Horrid stuff, cocktails. She made a little face as she took a sip.

"I certainly envy you, Major." Mr. Kane's smile seemed rather odiously to curl around her.

The atmosphere of men, the little glasses, the jaded smell of all the cigarettes and cigars that had been consumed in that room, turned her faint. How could those other women at adjoining tables stand it?

She sat on smiling at the two men. She smiled as the pain in her head began again.

But Hal was enjoying himself. He was launched on the subject of pools and cards. It seemed to her as if Mr. Kane with too clever gestures of his narrow white hands were flattering him overmuch about his skill and his winnings.

"Hal, I'm afraid—I'll have to go out." She must have looked her discomfort, for he was at once on his feet helping her up.

"Excuse us a moment, my dear fellow."

Mr. Kane's concern hastened their departure. Oh, but she was glad to breathe the sweet fresh air, glad to nestle in the rug which Hal laid out over the steamer chair, glad to be alone with him in the gathering dusk.

Stupid of her to give in like this. But she couldn't possibly, not even for his dear sake, face the dining room. The horrid din of the gong sent a shudder through her. She felt very pathetic in her white finery, very feminine and helpless.

"Hal, dear, will you forgive me if I don't come down with you? If I can have a bit of dinner here——"

Of course he would forgive her. Devilish shame. Anything else he could do for her? He bent to pat her on the shoulder.

She watched him swagger away. How lovely the sea with night slowly drawing over it and the stars blossoming like a field of jonquils. She felt deliciously lazy and relaxed. She sat white and gold and dreamy with the tray on her lap the steward had brought. People drifted by.

There was a slight bustle as the deck steward and a maid carrying rugs and cushions attended to the comfort of a tall woman who was settling in the next chair.

Why, it was the English lady with the hooked nose and the earrings who had stared at her that first day. She was staring now, but into space. Her dark cloak and the light scarf which shrouded her hair

somehow lent her the familiar air of a Stamford matron starting out for a party. But there the resemblance ceased. Her long thin profile looked very, very English and rather terrifying.

Would it be indiscreet to talk to a stranger on shipboard, especially when you and that stranger were seated side by side in the intimate dusk of evening? Suddenly, she wanted to talk to someone.

"This is my first trip. It's very exciting to go over for the first time." She leaned forward, a little wistful and very young in her white gown and cape.

"Indeed!"

Of course the English were that way—reserved, very formal until you got to know them. "You're English, aren't you? My husband is an Englishman."

This time the lady turned and looked her over with a not unkindly china-blue eye. "Really!"

Oh, dear, would all those people, Hal's friends, be so standoffish? "Perhaps you know my husband's name—Brassington-Welsh—Major Brassington-Welsh?" Her smile was a bright enough question to draw a civil answer.

"Brassington-Welsh—" The lady pronounced it thoughtfully.

She wasn't going to be snubbed by anyone. "It's a very old family. Brassington was my husband's mother's name, and Welsh his father's. But the estate is Brassington Hall." That would show her.

It seemed indeed to show her something, for there

was a perceptible thaw in her manner, and the china-blue eye now seemed to be regarding a possible new acquaintance. "The name is familiar. You'll be living in England then?"

"Oh, yes! But we're going to Paris first. I've always wanted to see Paris."

Just when they were getting on so nicely, a stiff-shouldered figure strolled toward them. It was the pinkish man who, as he approached, threw out a friendly— "How are you now?"

"Quite all right, thank you." The lady hesitated. "Mrs.—Brassington-Welsh was telling me about her husband's place—Brassington Hall, didn't you say?"

Well, it wasn't the way they did things at home. But she supposed it might be considered an introduction, a one-sided one which the Englishman acknowledged with a bow.

"Brassington Hall," he repeated as if it conveyed something to him. "May I ask in what county?"

How stupid of her! Of course she knew, but just for the moment she couldn't think—and here she was blushing like a school girl. "I'm afraid I don't remember——"

Even if he were a little stiff, you felt that he could twinkle humanly. She liked the straight, serious look he gave her as if he were understanding her youth and inexperience. Very different from Mr. Kane. If only Hal would turn up now——

And then he came, hurrying, not noticing her com-

panions, only seeing her. "I got Kane to dine with me. Hope you haven't been lonely." His shirt front gleamed, his face shone ruddy in the electric light overhead.

"Indeed, I haven't been lonely." Her smile played brightly over the group. "We've been talking about Brassington Hall. I couldn't remember what county——"

Why, what was the matter with him? He and the pinkish gentleman eyed one another, and stood like men of wood. Constraint was in the air.

Oh, well, if they wanted to be formal! "May I present my husband, Major Brassington-Welsh?" She waited for the murmured names which finally enlightened her—Lady Forbes, Colonel Annersley. Followed a pause so brittle that it had to break.

She broke it a trifle nervously. "Hal, dear, where *is* your place?" Brassington Hall was the raft upon which they might all safely climb and drift toward the shores of their England.

But Hal, for once, didn't seem eager to drift anywhere in company. "In Surrey." His tone was curt. And his hand went to his moustache as if to assure himself that it was still there.

"Ah, indeed! Surrey—" The Colonel's stare, she thought, was a shade insolent. "Happen to know Lansmere? I stopped with him last summer. I think he mentioned Brassington Hall."

Hal gave him back the stare. "Lansmere was a friend of my governor's."

"Ah, yes! But I understood—" Whatever the Colonel understood he suddenly decided to keep to himself.

It was too bad of Hal to act in this unsociable way before her new friends—people who would know now who he was. But there he stood without saying a word. It made him look too heavy when he drew his brows together; it clouded the usual handsome good nature of his face.

Meanwhile Lady Forbes had grown visibly more gracious. She was really quite pretty when she smiled. "I have quite a number of friends in Surrey," she said. "No doubt we shall run across one another."

"I do hope so." She was beginning to like Lady Forbes. "Hal, how long do we stay in Paris?"

But he had stepped to the deck railing to study the sky. He turned with a sudden brusqueness. "It's a bit chilly for you, don't you think?"

If it were chilly, he and Colonel Annersley were responsible. But her animation, and the courage to renew it, had slipped from her. "Perhaps we had better go in." Her smile was mechanical as she rose from her chair.

The Colonel's clear grey eye, fixed on her as he stepped aside, seemed to hold a message which she couldn't quite make out. It was a swift and deeply searching look which she met, standing beside Hal with her head held high. Of course she couldn't be friends with anyone her husband didn't like. And

yet she felt oddly reluctant to leave as Lady Forbes murmured a friendly good evening.

Hal didn't speak to her. What could she have done to offend him? It was the first time, the very first time she had ever felt so miserable. She glanced up at him as he stalked along the deck, and the little hurt in her heart burned at the injustice of his mood. They were dancing in the big saloon. She loved dancing. There were groups of people talking to one another, strolling about or watching the dancers. The music made her want to cry because always before it had meant light-hearted rhythms, light-hearted chatter and the swaying movement of dance in a partner's arms.

She moved slowly, passing it all. Going to bed.

And now the door was shut and they were alone in their cabin, and the tears came. She stood there in her pretty white gown and cape, feeling that really, really, he hadn't been kind.

Then she was in his arms and he was fiercely loving her. He was telling her that he had been a brute but that it was all over now.

"I thought you'd like them, Hal. I thought——"

But he didn't want to talk about them. It was all right. Everything was all right.

She was glad to be tucked in bed and to lie very still. And she didn't mind in the least if he left her for a while to go and play a little game with the odious Kane man. Only she wished he wouldn't.

"I half promised Kane and two other chaps to

take a hand to-night—" He stood over her very big and humble.

She wasn't going to be the kind of wife who would ever hold back her husband. "Do go, then, Hal dear."

"I won't be long," he promised from the door.

She lay back listening to the noises, the creak and groan, as of uneasy ghosts roving through the ship, the footfalls, the sound, rather felt than heard, of the sea.

Marriage. Love. You played with these things in your mind, and then when they came, they were not at all as you imagined them. They were made up of little disappointments, betrayals, surrenders.

Hal hadn't meant to be rude. He hadn't meant to hurt her. He would never willingly hurt her.

3

Hal wouldn't explain why, on this brilliant morning of their last day, he preferred to mope in the cabin. When she, herself, proposed the smoking room before luncheon, he only grunted and flopped over on the bed, where he lay smoking cigarettes, and flipping ashes on the floor. And right after breakfast the steward had brought him a bottle of Scotch. The smell of it, somehow, poisoned for her the beautiful morning air.

She had counted so on this last day of blue skies and sea. But there was no pleasure in going out

alone, and there was always the danger that Mr. Kane might attach himself to her for a morning stroll. She felt self-conscious about being seen with Mr. Kane, particularly by Lady Forbes and Colonel Annersley who, beyond a polite nod now and then, had not sought a closer acquaintance. You couldn't blame them after Hal's brusque behaviour of the other evening.

She wouldn't have minded if only he had told her what was the matter with him. He assured her that nothing was the matter. But she knew better. Her little sigh, as she turned the pages of her book, implied that she was being very patient indeed.

The knock on the door came as a relief. But when, at her bright invitation, the door opened and the Kane man stepped in, she had only time for a gesture of surprise and annoyance before suddenly Hal sprang to his feet— "What d'you mean by coming here?"

His voice startled her. Something had obviously happened to change his friendly attitude toward Mr. Kane. Of course he had no business to intrude and Hal knew how much she disliked him. But even that couldn't quite explain the tense moment preceding Mr. Kane's murmured:— "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Brassington-Welsh. I must speak to your husband."

Hal wouldn't let her answer. His face frightened her, it was so red and fierce. He towered in front

of her, his hands thrust in his pockets as if they were safer there. "Get out," he roared.

But Mr. Kane did not get out. He stayed by the door, his shallow, oyster-coloured eyes fixed on Hal. Somehow his polished surface seemed to have thinned, so that one caught uneasy glimpses of the man beneath it all,—the man she distrusted.

"I would rather have spoken to you alone, Major," and he looked at her before softly adding, "the Captain wants to see us."

"He does, does he?" Hal's voice was lower, harsher. He strode over to Mr. Kane, and his hands still in his pockets, his head thrust forward, he stood there glowering. "Well, I'm not goin'—understand? It's your own rotten business. How dare you come near me after last night?"

What were they talking about? What could have happened last night? "Hal, dear, please—please Mr. Kane—" She felt hot and sick with the sense of outraged privacy.

Mr. Kane raised his long white hand. "One moment, Major." And then he turned to her. You could see now that he was nervous, struggling to keep his poise. "I think you should know, Mrs. Brassington-Welsh, that there was a little trouble last night. Your husband and I——"

Hal was upon him before she could speak. "You dirty blackguard. Leave my wife out of it." He had the man by the shoulder, was hustling him to the door.

"You ask your husband about that little game last night." His voice reached her thin and venomous as Hal pushed him out and slammed the door.

But ugliness lingered in the air as Hal whirled around, his face and eyes congested. "Damn the fellow's impertinence! I'd like to wring his crooked neck. I'd like——"

"Hal, what happened last night?" It was her right to know. She was no longer a child to shrink from unpleasantness. But she couldn't help feeling young and rather helpless as she faced him with a brave show of composure.

He avoided the pleading of her eyes. "Oh, nothin'!"

"Hal, something did happen. You've got to tell me." Her hand was on his arm, her face lifted to his. "I want to share everything with you, Hal. You must never keep anything from me." She made him look at her. Yes, he must see how deeply, deeply in earnest she was; how love to her meant just this—this sharing.

He looked and turned his head away, as if he couldn't bear what he saw. "You're so sweet—I'm not fit—" And he broke loose from her.

"Hal, what do you mean?" Now she was startled to the very roots of her being—straight and quivering as a golden flower in a wind.

"What do I mean?" He swung around, his hand fumbling at his moustache. He looked at her again,

and staunchly she met his eyes. So they stood rocking a little to the sway of the boat.

She smiled with a tremulous curl of lip. "You big goose to say you're not fit— What happened last night? Tell me that first." He might as well realise that his Nita always, always got what she wanted in the end.

"Hang it all, I'll tell you then." But it seemed hard to begin.

She sat down and waited.

The cabin was too small for him. He paced back and forth, a big nervous man frowning with those thick black brows. He stopped to light a cigarette, and his hand, she noticed, trembled.

"You've heard of professional gamblers, of course," he burst out at last. "Well, that's what Kane is. A low-down crook, too. And—well—they caught him at it last night in a fellow called Noland's cabin. We were playin' with his pack of cards. He'd pin-pricked the face cards—understand? And Noland—" Now that he was started, he couldn't stop.

She imagined the hot smoky cabin, the men drinking and playing. Red, excited men. Hal and Kane winning—Hal and Kane——

"But, Hal, you've got nothing to do with it." She sat up brightly indignant. She would have blotted out the picture if she could.

"They wouldn't believe me," he raged. "Confound 'em. Why, that chap Noland said——"

She saw it all. She saw it as he blurted out the end of the wretched story. She heard the angry voices, saw Kane slender and pale letting Hal take the blame with him. Major Brassington-Welsh and Mr. Kane always partners, always winning— Yes, Kane had used Hal.

"What could I do?" Hal groaned, tramping to and fro. "Oh, what an ass I've been! What a blighted ass!"

Barriers down. Hal talking to her like this. Man to man, comrade to comrade. This was life at last, not as she had dreamed it, but infinitely dearer. It made her feel shining in his defence, like generous young steel leaping from its scabbard.

She was up and beside him. "Hal, we've got to do something. You can't let anyone in this world believe——"

"We're docking to-morrow," he muttered, and as if he were weary of the whole ugly business he sank down on the couch. Lit another cigarette. "I shouldn't have bothered you. It's just my rotten luck——"

"Bothered me!" She flew to him. She felt so tremendously alive now, so challenged for his sake. And oh, how she hated Kane! "Listen, Hal, we can't let this go. I have it—" She did have it with the rush of inspiration. Why, it was so simple. Those men hadn't believed him because they didn't know who and what he was. His own fault, of

course, for taking up with Kane on the boat. But suppose someone who did know who he was vouched for him. Suppose a man like Colonel Annersley went to the Commandant! An Englishman, a compatriot, who obviously had placed Hal through Brassington Hall and that friend of Hal's father, whatever his name was.

What if Hal hadn't liked him or Lady Forbes? People who after all belonged together stood together, didn't they? If there had, for instance, been anyone from Stamford on board, and *she* Nita Moffett had got into trouble, wouldn't she have gone to them at once?

"Listen, Hal dear, if you won't ask Annersley, I will." She knelt beside him, tilting back her head, and that sense of life, that beautiful life awakening, seemed to run and ripple from eyes to lips.

And then he looked at her so strangely. And all of a sudden the cabin grew very silent and there were only the sounds of the ship and the sea, as if something immense and relentless were carrying them on. The light of the afternoon was like a large blue eye in the porthole. She thought of Kane and the Commandant who wanted to see Hal. "Please let me—please."

"I can't, Nita." He said it as if she had dragged it out of him. Under the tender weight of her arms as she knelt there, she felt his knees stiffen, contract.

"You can't? But Hal, Annersley knows——"

"Yes, he knows." How slowly he spoke! And

his face—! Why, he seemed to be asking something of her. She had never realised him before, never realised his eyes could look so world-weary, never known that his mouth could have that bitter, that forlorn droop.

"I don't understand. Why can't you, Hal?" She knew that her own face had changed in a moment when the rustle of the sea came to them.

"I can't," he said, "because—well, you'd better hear it now."

She moved a little away from him, not that she didn't want to be near him, but that she wanted him to be free to tell her. Gravely she watched him, feeling, learning——

He drew a deep breath and straightened his shoulders.

"Annersley knows," he said. "I didn't dare tell you. My father threw me out when I was a boy. I don't own Brassington Hall. I'm what—Annersley would call a rotter."

Didn't own Brassington Hall—didn't own it! Lied to her. Still on her knees, rigid, not moving, she stared at him.

"But I swear I'll buy it back, Nita. I've got a bit of business on now. Sure thing. Meant to get it all fixed up and ready before we—" And then he broke down. He sat there, his hands over his face. His whole life had been like this wretched Kane business, everything against him. Then he had met her and—well, now he had something to work for.

Get back Brassington Hall. Question of a few months. But Annersley would be against him like the others. No good appealing to him. Nothing could happen, except what had happened already. Better let it go.

Didn't own Brassington Hall. Everyone against him. Hadn't dared tell her. Why? Because he loved her so. Hal this way, sitting with his hands over his face. She was bowed and broken with him. Then the strange new feeling came. It was like a pain. It drew her to her feet. Her cheeks were wet. Her arms reached out to him. His head—there—on her breast. Brassington Hall! Later—later.

"You'll stand by me, Nita?"

This big man calling to her. And the beautiful, the strange pain grew within her.

"I'm with you, my dear, my dear."

And then he went on, telling, telling.

CHAPTER II

THE SAD ADVENTURERS

I

WHY, after all, should she care? Why, in the passing of years had she held on to the bits of faith left to her? Hal had long ago forgotten that night when she had put her arms around him and forgiven, promising to stand by him in the cleaner, brighter future.

She had fought for that cleaner, brighter future. Fought in vain, it would seem. It was as if a mist had gradually obscured her vision, getting in between her and the old clear-cut standards. Bad luck. That was Hal's answer whenever things went wrong. She had come to accept it. It was what she did accept that made her despise herself. But what was the use of self-contempt in the life she had, if not chosen, at least suffered to become hers? When you loved a man—in spite of everything—you grew in with him. Your best was his; his worst was yours. So it was with them.

Love. Pity. Yearning. And then not caring because she cared too much. It was really the caring that counted.

At first she had been fascinated by Paris and Cairo, Monte Carlo, Biarritz, and the strange outskirts of the world through which they had hazardously wandered through the war—always moving on when English consuls grew inquisitive. Hal's papers had been all right, of course; right enough to avoid definite trouble. He had explained to her why he wasn't in the army. Honourably discharged years ago—and then his game leg.

There had been a terrible day shortly after America came in, when she had actually tried to drive him out; when she had entered into a blind fury against this great good-natured hulk of a man, this boaster, this coward. How bitterly she had wept when he pretended to take her at her word!

Enlist? That very day. He had only kept out of it for her sake. But what would become of her? She could have gone home to her mother, she supposed, leaving him to die. Sometimes she wished she had done just that.

Too late. Those years had taken from her what no other life could give back. Hal was fifty. And she——

She felt old enough to-day. There was another hole in her last pair of silk stockings, the ones Hal had given her in Paris six months ago, when the Rawston boy paid up. She sat down to her mending. Every day before she could go out it was the same—mean little repairs, mean little tricks with ink and cleaning fluid, mean little juggling with needles and

pins. The hem of her skirt was ripped; a rusty cigarette burn showed in the bodice. For to-day she could hide that with a bunch of violets Monte had given her. Her head ached. Hal and Monte had talked late into the night. The room still reeked of their cigars and whiskey, and it was really too damp to open the window. Hal was out now with Monte and Crawford. She must look her best when she met them later at Doney's. Poor old Hal! He had his hands full this time. Crawford was no such fool as young Rawston.

The hole was over the heel, the very worst place, where the frayed edge of her slipper would rub and rub. Every step a rub. She was like the stocking—giving from use, deftly patched where the pressure came. What ailed her to-day? She hated everything. She hated the large, stagnant room, from which the grandeur and ghosts of past Florentines had retreated, disdaining to haunt such a cheapened place. Pension plush—traps for dust. Dingy ornaments, a shabby red carpet on the tiled floor. The inevitable bottle of whiskey and yesterday's *Daily Mail* on the table beside a grubby ash receiver. Hal's spotted dressing gown trailing over a chair.

The windows stared with tired old eyes at the sluggish Arno, the mud banks, the Ponte alle Grazie. December mist hung between the hills, filling the valley as a bowl with smoke. A few tourists strayed along the livid quays, their noses pecking at guide-books. If they only knew! She, too, had once loved

it; loved it still, on certain days. If it could all be simple—songs, doves, sunsets and bells, beggars and frescoes.

The hole was stopped up; and a very neat job she had made of it. Now for the poor old black satin, which she had worn and worn—afternoons and evenings, evenings and afternoons. It drooped limp and skimpy over her plump arm. But black was always safe, and the quality of the stuff was good. She had bought it with her mother's last check, a year ago. There would be no check this Christmas. And it was her own stupid fault, for she had boasted once too often in her letters of Hal's prospering affairs. This week's mail had brought her, as a result, an illustrated book on Italian art and a letter from her mother announcing that the money she so desperately needed for a new gown was being sent in her name to starving Armenian children.

Hal had roared with laughter, and she had ended in seeing the joke on herself. Meanwhile she had nothing fit to wear.

Well, if the Crawford deal succeeded Hal would be generous. That he never failed to be when he was in funds. *If* it succeeded! Hal was always so sure things would come out as he had planned. She wished he had taken her more into his confidence. But that was like Hal. Monte counted now—Monte, his best friend; Monte, whom he trusted.

Through the dim grey afternoon the bells swung, an unending muffled chain. She must hurry. Dress-

ing was like piecing a picture puzzle together out of odds and ends. Her black suède gloves would have to be inked again, her coat needed a stitch, her black velvet toque brushing.

2

The Via Tornabuoni. Mrs. Brassington-Welsh on the Tornabuoni, coming and going, going and coming, every afternoon. Each city had for her some such beaten track. In Paris it had been the Rue Daunou—Ciro's. One could lose oneself even on beaten tracks in the larger cities. But the Via Tornabuoni was a short street with a long tongue speaking every language. Sooner or later you ran across there everyone you wished to avoid. The early evening was like damp grey tulle, wilting and clinging.

Doney's white-and-gold front. You could look through the large lace-curtained windows at the little worlds gathered about the bar, the cake counter, the round tables. It was crowded this Saturday afternoon. She hovered a moment, a plump, greenish-blond little woman, peering in. There they were in a corner of the largest room. Not talking! That was a bad sign. Hal loomed heavily behind his watery whiskey. The Crawford man's pink, wary face, bending over his tea, wore a dreamy blankness. Monte's back was to her; the curl had gone out of it. Well, she would change all that. She smiled,

practising an entrance, bright and self-assured. Her wide red mouth lifted her face into light when she smiled like this; her thin nostrils widened; the lines around her eyes, like little gold clutches around jewels, loosened.

"Well, I never! Anita—Anita Moffett! To think of running across you here! My dear, you must forgive me. I've forgotten your husband's name."

A small, brown eager woman holding on to her hand, two tall girls smiling. Why, it was Mrs. Edward Lucas, from Stamford, and Edith, grown up; and Katharine.

Have you ever lived on foreign dishes for years and years, pretending you liked them, and then suddenly come upon a home dish that made you see a wooden house with a porch, flower beds, a maple tree, forgotten faces, young fluttering gowns, a plump figure in a rocking chair? How swiftly the flying words, the questions, the answers knitted the past to this moment on the Via Tornabuoni! Anita Moffett—Mrs. Brassington-Welsh. All that she had been, all that she had hoped to be she became now before this little audience.

"You must have tea with us," Mrs. Lucas urged. "Your mother told us to look you up, but she couldn't give us any permanent address. She said your husband's business kept you travelling all over the world."

Hal's business! She had forgotten it, forgotten

Crawford. She remembered now, but it was too late. Hal would have to play up to her friends. He would have to be decent to them.

"I think my husband is in the farther room. He'll be so glad," she murmured.

Edith smiled at her. Edith was a handsome girl —long, clean-limbed, chestnut and pink, like her mother.

"It must be exciting, travelling a lot," she was saying.

"Oh, yes, very exciting."

Mrs. Brassington-Welsh at Doney's with three friends of the real sort, people from home. She held her head tilted a little forward, nodding to Cervelli, puny, prying bounder that he was; to old bald Mr. Breitstein with his bulging eyes; to Roddy Maxwell, the painter. Hal's stare questioned from across the room, "What in the name——"

The three men had risen and were waiting. She introduced them in her prettiest manner. "I think you met Mrs. Lucas, Hal, in New York—long ago, in fact, the day we were married. And may I present Count Montefichi and Mr. Crawford?"

As they all settled sociably around the table she mutely appealed to Hal, and read his answering look with an odd distaste. She knew him so well! She knew the signs. Yes, he would play up. He seemed to swell, to fill the room with the booming cheer of his voice, the rounding of his chest. His colour deepened, brick red against the sweeping dark

moustache, the grizzled hair. Well, well, here was luck! Nita's old friends. Of course he remembered. Tea? Cakes? Anything else? How did Mrs. Lucas think Nita looked? Best little woman in the world; he didn't half deserve her.

Mrs. Lucas was nodding and smiling in her direction, as if to say, "Fine man, your husband, my dear."

She caught sight of herself in a mirror. She was flushed, excited, bright of eye and lip—too bright. Monte was talking in his caressing Italian manner to Katharine. He had expanded again like a plant under the sun, slender, glossy and ripe. Katharine was thinner than her mother. She looked like a Madonna vaguely missing the child in her arms. She kept glancing at Monte from time to time, half frightened, half fascinated. After all, the Montefichi were a very old family. They had stood, so far, behind Monte. On his mother's account he was still received by a few of the more indulgent Italian hostesses.

"If it were England, now, you'd be staying with us at Brassington Hall. Great old place. The Brassingtons, you know."

Her lips tightened on her smile to hold it gay and unconcerned. She wished Hal wouldn't. Brassington Hall—the Brassingtons!

Crawford's round blue eye was fastened on Hal. She didn't trust Crawford. He was telling Edith now of the villa he hoped to buy at Settignano; of

his plans for furnishing it. Hal heard him and further brightened. She met Edith's look, direct, friendly. It was a look of daylight through an open window falling on shabby spots, on mended places. Had her violets shifted? Did the cigarette burn show? She smiled on while her hand crept up to feel, to adjust. She wouldn't smoke after her tea. It was better not to have taken a cocktail.

Monte had excused himself to Katharine and was bowing over the hand of a wicked-looking old woman hung with jewels and attended by two waspish young men. Cervelli had joined her. He whispered in her ear.

"That's the Princess Lubitzki the count is talking to," she volunteered to Katharine, who, shy and eager, responded, "You know lots of interesting people here, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," she answered carelessly.

Why did Crawford lean across the table just then?

"You know the princess?"

His manner implied that he, at least, had heard of the lady's reputation. She tried to signal Hal. Of course they didn't know her. They had met her once at one of Roddy Maxwell's mixed teas.

But Hal had to blunder out, "Well, rather. Don't forget to speak to her, Nita." And to Mrs. Lucas: "She was telling me the other day an amusing little thing the Queen of Rumania said to her when——"

She tried to kick him under the table, and struck

Crawford's foot instead, who murmured calmly, "I beg your pardon."

"How long are you going to be here?" she cut in on Hal's rambling absurdities.

"A week or ten days. You must let us see something of you, dear child."

"See something of us! We count on showing you around," Hal cried jovially. He knew a bit about art. Ask his friend, Crawford, there. They must let him be their guide. Too bad they couldn't come to the house, but he and his wife were in very temporary lodgings. Birds of passage, you know. However, trust him to make the programme. What about to-morrow morning? A visit to the Uffizi, perhaps? Lunch at a little place he knew where the food was ripping. Crawford would come along, of course?

"Oh, yes, do come!" urged Edith. Not a fool, that girl.

It was decent of Hal to want to give her friends a good time. He was paying for the tea and cakes now. Trust Monte not to return to the table until that was done. A fifty-lire bill; five-lire tip.

"I'm going to write your mother to-night," said little Mrs. Lucas, linking arms as they moved out. "I think the Major is just splendid. And do tell me about that nice Mr. Crawford. I knew some Crawfords once in West Haven."

It was good to hear that homely chatter, to listen to those voices—Edith's clear and firm, Katharine's

shy notes faintly slurred. Hal strolled jauntily on one side of Mrs. Lucas, she on the other. Monte followed with Katharine. Crawford and Edith brought up the rear. Florence did its best for them, presenting through the haze of a thousand foreign allurements romantic silhouettes, hooded and caped, a tenor in a love song, the brooding stone of old *palazzi* huge in the mist, pale drowned lights and bridges. Then the sleek hotel on the Lung' Arno Acciaioli and shaking hands and promises of meeting the next day. Mrs. Lucas kissed her.

She tucked her hand in Hal's arm, turning to wave good-night to Crawford and Monte. She felt gay and proud of her friends, and wanted to talk about them and about Stamford. Little anecdotes came to her mind, links of play and work between the Lucas family and her own. If her father had only taken Mr. Lucas' advice he wouldn't have failed so miserably. Her mother would be rich now, as rich as Mrs. Lucas, whose husband had left her a fortune.

Hal led her on, listening, questioning. But she grew sad thinking of her father and his wasted chances, of her mother back there all alone while Mrs. Lucas could afford to travel, to stay at the best hotels, to bring up her girls in such ease and luxury.

Her hand slipped from Hal's arm. She walked silent and apart, her joy gone. The pleasant picture of the afternoon broke into fretting particles—Cervelli's crooked smile at her entrance, Monte smiling at Katharine, Crawford's round blue eye,

Brassington Hall, her flushed face and red lips smiling, that fifty-lire bill Hal had handed over with such a lordly gesture. And behind these jostling fragments she saw the faces of the three men as they had been sitting there at table when she peered through Doney's window.

She glanced toward Hal. He walked heavily among the shadows. He was frowning and tugging at his long moustache.

"What happened to you and Monte this afternoon?" she suddenly demanded.

She knew that lowering look, that sideways movement of his head and twitch of his shoulders. He would have avoided answering her if he could.

"Oh, nothing. We went to Monte's and showed Crawford the stuff."

"You went to Monte's? Where? What d'you mean?"

"His people's house, of course, where he lives. They're not in town, though. It's all right, Nita. Now don't bother me, that's a good girl."

"You went to the Palazzo Montifichi?" Her voice was sharp, afraid. "Oh, Hal, what are you two doing there?"

He took her arm again, squeezing her elbow. "Don't you worry, old girl," he said in his loud, confident manner. "Monte's got a right under the paternal roof, hasn't he? And if Crawford wants to buy some stuff out of Monte's own apartment there it's his business, isn't it?"

She stopped short, dragging him to a standstill.

"Oh, Hal, you're not selling any of the family things while they're away?"

"Good Lord, no, Nita! Come along, come along." He tugged her forward.

"If you want to know," he went on impatiently, "it's stuff Monte has."

"Stuff you got for Monte, you mean," she insisted.

She saw it all now—the palazzo being used to bait a fraud. Monte's rooms furnished with clever imitations, emblazoned, perhaps, with the Montifichi arms. Monte could do that to his father and mother—knowing that if he were caught they would have to save him, have to cover the scandal. But if Hal were caught!

"Don't have anything to do with it. Oh, Hal, I've never interfered before; but this—it's beastly!"

She clung to him, her short legs trying to keep up with his stride. Her knees sagged. She was cold and wet and miserable.

They reached the *pension,* with its smells of frying oil, of damp walls, soggy linen; reached their room, where everything was flung about as she had left it—bits of thread sticking like hairs to the arms of the chair into which she sank, ravellings of stuff, needles, spools, a crusted bottle of ink, the rank ash receivers.

Hal looked sheepish, uneasy. He poured himself a drink. Then clumsily he bent over her, trying to soothe her.

"It's all right, Nita. Leave it to me. I swear to you——"

"If ever Mrs. Lucas knew!" she wailed.

He brought her a drink. She gulped it down.

"Now listen to me, old girl——"

She listened. The drink had done her good. He marched from the table to the window and back again, his voice rumbling on. Frankly, the afternoon hadn't gone any too smoothly. Well, Crawford had looked the stuff over and liked several pieces enough to talk prices. No doubt of it, he would come around in time. But the devil of it was that he had asked about some other things he had seen in the hall and the big drawing-room they had to cross to get to Monte's place. Monte was in a funk. Ticklish business. They couldn't explain why only the contents of Monte's apartment were for sale. Point was now not to seem too eager; to hold off for a bit. He'd been thinking that that was where her friends could help.

"You're not going to drag them in?" she fiercely interrupted.

Drag them in. Of course not. They'd simply play around together for a few days, Crawford one of the party. No further mention of buying or selling. See? Nice, cosy atmosphere. Create confidence and all that sort of thing and you hold your man. It might even be a good idea if she could get the old lady to talk him up to Crawford.

"Promise you won't do anything more while

they're here and I won't interfere," she said slowly. "But if you try any funny business on Mrs. Lucas—if ever she should hear—I'd never forgive you, never! Understand?"

Couldn't she trust him? Of course he'd promise. Jolly people, her friends. By Jove, it did him good to meet such women. He'd do his best to make their stay agreeable. Pleasure to him. Word of honour, she needn't worry.

She was no longer worrying about anything. Lassitude slipped like a fluid from head to foot. She let it flow through her with a sense of relief. Who and what was she to judge Hal! She had his promise not to shame her before them.

3

Every night while she slept she seemed to grow stale as the room. She was at her worst in the morning. She never could clearly remember the day before except in its relation to the familiar dingy uncertainty and oppressive fears which overhung her waking. She thought first of Crawford this morning. Then she thought of the Lucas family with a tingle of excitement. They stood between her and Crawford. She wanted the day to be beautiful for them. But the day was not beautiful. She shivered as she climbed out of the bed and drew on an old sweater. Over that she slipped a faded pink silk

wrapper. Then she trailed to the door at the maid's knock.

Bitter coffee in thick white cups notched on the edges. Hal sprawling opposite her, his long legs reaching under the table, his skin mottled, stiff with black bristles, his eyes bloodshot. Not very alluring in the morning, either of them. But poor old Hal was at least never grumpy. He drank down the vile black stuff they called coffee and took to his blackened pipe without complaint. She had never caught him looking at her critically, even though she knew how rough were her unrouged lips, how wilted her complexion.

There was one thing she had forgotten when they made all these plans for sight-seeing. She couldn't go out in the daylight; not in that black satin dress. She fetched it to show to Hal. He rubbed his cheek thoughtfully. Even he realised how impossible it was.

"Haven't you anything else, Nita?"

She was grateful to him for not saying "Why won't that do?" She had her old travelling dress, of course, the one which still held the dust of their wanderings during the war. She had hung it in a dark corner, hoping never to wear it again. It was like bringing out a buried disgrace. She brought it out. Hal didn't feel about it the way she did. He looked pleased, relieved.

"What's the matter with that?"

There was nothing really the matter. It never

had been becoming. That brownish colour didn't suit her. The skirt was too long, but she had noticed that Mrs. Lucas didn't follow the fashion in the length of her skirts. The neck needed freshening. Three buttons were missing in the two front rows of trimming. She must have them in her sewing box. She could wear it, she finally decided, if she worked on it that morning and had it pressed that afternoon. Hal would have to meet her friends alone. He took this news cheerfully.

There was another thing. She couldn't wear her long black suède gloves with these long sleeves. If she could have managed new gloves, and perhaps a veil—one could do wonders with veils—her black velvet toque would look quite smart.

Hal was shaved and dressed. With his back to her he fumbled in his wallet. When he turned he held a fifty-lire note.

"Will this do?"

Do? Of course it would do. But where had he got this money, when only last week he had told her they were living on credit? He shrugged his shoulders and smiled. The bill, crumpled and torn, felt like silk in her hand. It was good to finger money again. She knew just where she would get the gloves and the veil.

"Thank you, old dear," she said with a rush of tenderness.

He chuckled, standing there, very débonair. His brown suit, old as it was, fitted him with authority.

His gloves matched his spats. His fedora was just slightly cocked over a bushy black brow. She drew her faded pink silk dressing gown closer around her sweater and lifted her head to be kissed.

Sewing and mending all morning. A delicious hour in the shops. She thought of Hal and her friends out together. She thought of Crawford.

4

Came days of sudden blue, a rare flowering in the season of rains. Spring thrilled lightly through the air with the passing brilliance of a coloured bird. Flowers everywhere among the aromatic Christmas trees for sale on the *piazzi*—violets, narcissi, roses. She had never walked so much in all her life, never visited so many churches, never climbed so many steps or gazed at so many saints.

The Lucas family were doing Florence, doing it more on foot than in carriages, because you saw more when you walked. Monte was doing it, Crawford was doing it. Hal organised these daily expeditions; carried them through, as it were, on the crest of his booming voice, which directed, explained, instructed at every turn. Each night now he would study her mother's Christmas present, the illustrated book on Italian art. Each night her feet ached and her neck ached from the exercise of looking up at things. She was too tired to wonder any longer why he made these prodigious efforts or where the

had been becoming. That brownish colour didn't suit her. The skirt was too long, but she had noticed that Mrs. Lucas didn't follow the fashion in the length of her skirts. The neck needed freshening. Three buttons were missing in the two front rows of trimming. She must have them in her sewing box. She could wear it, she finally decided, if she worked on it that morning and had it pressed that afternoon. Hal would have to meet her friends alone. He took this news cheerfully.

There was another thing. She couldn't wear her long black suède gloves with these long sleeves. If she could have managed new gloves, and perhaps a veil—one could do wonders with veils—her black velvet toque would look quite smart.

Hal was shaved and dressed. With his back to her he fumbled in his wallet. When he turned he held a fifty-lire note.

"Will this do?"

Do? Of course it would do. But where had he got this money, when only last week he had told her they were living on credit? He shrugged his shoulders and smiled. The bill, crumpled and torn, felt like silk in her hand. It was good to finger money again. She knew just where she would get the gloves and the veil.

"Thank you, old dear," she said with a rush of tenderness.

He chuckled, standing there, very débonair. His brown suit, old as it was, fitted him with authority.

His gloves matched his spats. His fedora was just slightly cocked over a bushy black brow. She drew her faded pink silk dressing gown closer around her sweater and lifted her head to be kissed.

Sewing and mending all morning. A delicious hour in the shops. She thought of Hal and her friends out together. She thought of Crawford.

4

Came days of sudden blue, a rare flowering in the season of rains. Spring thrilled lightly through the air with the passing brilliance of a coloured bird. Flowers everywhere among the aromatic Christmas trees for sale on the *piazzi*—violets, narcissi, roses. She had never walked so much in all her life, never visited so many churches, never climbed so many steps or gazed at so many saints.

The Lucas family were doing Florence, doing it more on foot than in carriages, because you saw more when you walked. Monte was doing it, Crawford was doing it. Hal organised these daily expeditions; carried them through, as it were, on the crest of his booming voice, which directed, explained, instructed at every turn. Each night now he would study her mother's Christmas present, the illustrated book on Italian art. Each night her feet ached and her neck ached from the exercise of looking up at things. She was too tired to wonder any longer why he made these prodigious efforts or where the

money came from to make them. But every morning in her refurbished brown suit, her new veil, her new gloves she met her friends at their hotel. When she was with Mrs. Lucas she felt safe, talking to her about her mother, listening to praise of Hal. "The Major is wonderful. What would we do without him?" Talking to Edith when Crawford wasn't attached to her elbow; talking to Katharine, whose young eyes held an exalted expression as she moved tirelessly among old splendours.

Shopping. What they bought! Stamped leather boxes and bags, photographs, frames, trinkets, pink coral for Edith, white coral for Katharine, pendant earrings, a set of tortoise-shell combs. If only she had the money they were spending—even half of it! She would stand by holding to her smile while they spent and spent.

"Oh, mother, do look at this!" "Edith, isn't this just the thing for Mrs. Morrison?" Presents for everyone at home. Presents for her too. A set of combs, a little coral necklace. She was ashamed of the tears that gathered when Mrs. Lucas gave her the necklace. She had always wanted one.

Hal was very active on these shopping expeditions. She knew why. She knew why he forgot his stick or his cigarette case or a package in nearly every one of the shops and had to go back. After all, what did the few lire he could pick up this way in commissions mean to them?

But she was still afraid of Crawford. She was

the more afraid of him as he appeared the more harmless, placid, cherubic, interested in Hal's lectures on art, attentive to everything Hal said, agreeable to all Hal's suggestions. She was sure Hal blundered now and then. Monte never blundered. Whatever else he lacked, he knew his Italy and recited it suavely with lyrical bursts—genuine, these—when his dark face and dark eyes glowed with love.

They had already prolonged their stay from one to two weeks. There were only a few days left. Then they would go brightly and safely as they had come, taking with them their souvenirs, their happy memories of travel. They would go home, never knowing. She would be left here in Florence. And they envied her. She shuddered away from the prettiness which so deceptively overlay the grim old stones, the beauty of cruel tombs. Everywhere in this town people were feeding like leeches fastened on the past, or fastened, as she and Hal, to the Crawfords who came and went. The air was full of the soft sucking of leeches—little tradesmen, beggars, hotel keepers; romantic old maids, artists, tourists, expatriates. She was weary of it all. She longed for solid homeliness, for a broad-shouldered, bustling American town, virtuous, ignorant of subtleties, crude in the faults of youth. She supposed she was homesick.

They were going early Monday morning. And on Sunday night, at his own request, Crawford was

She felt soggy with unshed tears as she trudged along the Arno. To-morrow they would be gone, speeding back to their home, their friends. And she would be here just the same. Mrs. Brassington-Welsh on the Tornabuoni. Mrs. Brassington-Welsh at Doney's. Oh, the dreariness of it!

She found Mrs. Lucas among valises and trunks in the large bright room facing the Arno, Mrs. Lucas in blue serge, little and plump, her young-looking parted hair drawn smooth. She came slowly forward.

"I sent Edith and Katharine out with Mr. Crawford," she said. "I wanted to talk to you alone, Anita."

Something was wrong. She let Mrs. Lucas take her hand and lead her to the red sofa at the foot of the bed. There was a big bunch of violets on the bureau. She should have brought flowers. From the window she saw the pastel-coloured roofs and loggias of the Borgo San Jacopo, the blue of sky ribbed with gauzy clouds. Mrs. Lucas held to her hand. Bad news. Fear clamped over her heart. She tried to smile.

"Anita, dear child, I'm going to hurt you," Mrs. Lucas began. She didn't want to listen. She stared at the clouds and wished she were up there melted in them, just floating lazily. "You know that I'm your mother's oldest friend. I held you in my arms the day you were born. I—for your mother's sake. If she knew——"

She must face those brown eyes fixed on her so anxiously, so sadly.

"Knew what?" Her voice was harsh.

Mrs. Lucas hesitated, her round face tremulous. "Last night I heard—oh, my poor dear child, I hardly dare tell you," she quavered. "Perhaps you don't know. Your husband——"

"My husband—well?"

What had she heard? What was coming?

It came with a rush.

"He's dishonest, Anita. He's not a good man. You do know! I can see it by your face. It's too terrible. I can't think how you—why didn't you come to me, child? When I think of my own girls——"

She was greatly agitated; tears in her eyes.

"It's a lie! Hal isn't bad. Who's been telling you things?" She sprang up, the hot blood pounding in her face.

Mrs. Lucas sat there stretching her arms out, appealing.

"Won't you think of me a little as a mother? Won't you trust me?"

What business was it of hers? After all Hal had done for them! They thought him fine enough at first. Who had meddled? They would go back now and talk. Her mother would hear!

"Hal's had hard times," she said passionately. "All business men go through hard times. But he never——"

"Mr. Crawford knows." It was dropped softly.

"Crawford? What did you tell him?"

She must be calmer than this. It was serious now—if Crawford knew.

Mrs. Lucas rose, facing her.

"I told him nothing. Will you answer me one question, Anita? Why did you send your husband to me for money? Why didn't you come yourself —yesterday?"

She didn't understand. Send Hal for money?

"I gave him five thousand lire for you yesterday afternoon. There were certain bills you had to meet, he said. His check hadn't arrived from England. He begged me not to refer to this—this loan—when I saw you to-day, because, he said, it had made you quite ill. He explained how sensitive and proud you were. But I thought it strange."

Hal had done that behind her back? Never told her! Not a word! Suddenly she crumpled on the sofa.

"You didn't know? My dear, you didn't know, then?"

She was humbled, broken. Sobs racked her from head to foot. There wasn't a shred left. Hal hadn't left her a shred. The treachery of it, the ugliness. She could never trust him again. She had lied for him, abased herself, risked even prison. She would have slaved for him. And he could go behind her back——

Mrs. Lucas spoke softly, bending over her, stroking her hand.

"I never thought I should advise a woman to leave her husband. But I didn't know there were —such things. And you, Janey's child, exposed to them. I feel as if Providence had sent me here. I've prayed through the night for strength and wisdom. Anita, you must come home with us. You must come home to your dear mother before it's too late." The kind voice wavered, went on again urgently. "You're in danger, child—terrible danger —here. You don't know how I fear for you."

Sob—sob and sob in blackness. Drenched and bleary. Hal hadn't spared her. She never could trust him again.

"Must I show you the danger? Must I tell you more?"

Was there any more to tell?

"Six months ago your husband sold in Paris some tapestries to a young man representing a big New York house—Stafford's. These tapestries when they arrived in New York were discovered to be very clever imitations. The young man was severely blamed and dismissed. I can't believe you knew all these things, Anita."

That was Rawston—poor Rawston, whom they had dazzled and flattered. How vile it was! And what had they got out of it when everything was paid up? Well, she'd tell the truth, at least.

"Yes, I know." She buried her head deeper in the cushions.

No reproach. A pause, and then: "I understand, dear. There was no one to help you. How you must have suffered! But you must listen to me now. You must! Your husband disappeared from Paris. Mr. Crawford happened by the merest chance to hear of him here. Mr. Crawford," Mrs. Lucas slowly added, "is one of the partners of Stafford's. Now do you see?"

Crawford! So that was it! She had been right to fear him. A trap—and Hal like a fool walking into it. What could they do now? She must warn him at once. She tried to struggle to her feet, but she was heavy with shame and fear. She couldn't raise her head.

"It was Mr. Crawford who told us about this last night. It had been worrying him because of my attachment to you and your mother. He and Edith—they're engaged. Edith made him tell us everything. He told us he was only waiting for further proofs to catch your husband and that Count we've been seeing, in the very act of selling worthless things for genuine antiques. It was a great shock to Katharine. She had thought the Count such a wonderful man. We begged and begged him—all of us—not to go on with it. Katharine was in tears. It seems the Count has talked to her so much about his family. But if it hadn't

been for Edith he would never have given in. Edith made him see that he should have had your husband—arrested—in the first place if he had felt that his duty, not have led him into something else that was dishonourable."

Honesty? Honour? Yes, that was a language these people understood. Could she ever get up, ever face the light? Edith had saved them. Edith!

Mrs. Lucas was saying, "Mr. Crawford is leaving with us to-morrow. You owe him a great deal, Anita. But because your husband got off this time it doesn't mean he will the next. From what Mr. Crawford says I'm afraid this won't be a lesson to him. What will become of you? Oh, child, you must come home, where you'll be safe among people who care for you."

Home? People who cared for her? They offered her this chance. She dragged herself from the sofa. Her hair clung to cheeks caked with rouge and powder. Her eyes were swollen. A sight; she was a sight. Mrs. Lucas mustn't see her face.

She was held tight and close against a soft breast. She had forgotten how sweet a woman's arms could be. She could let herself be weak, and lean for a moment. How good they were to her—how good. Oh, to begin life again, clean and unafraid among people who cared.

"I'll come," she whispered.

"My dear, my dear, you've taken a load from my heart. I just couldn't bear it. The girls will be so happy. You'll spend the night with us. I'll send my maid to pack your things. You can write him from here. You see how strongly I feel to advise you this way."

Gently the arms were withdrawn.

She stood again alone, turning her head aside.

"No, I must go back. I must tell him," she said wearily. "He'll let me go."

Mrs. Lucas looked distressed. "I'm sure I don't know—I've never before—wouldn't it be better to spare him and yourself?"

"Spare him!" She tried to smile. "After what he's done?" She must get those five thousand lire. She must bring them back. She brushed aside the damp wisps of hair, rubbed her cheeks. Rouge stains on her handkerchief. She dared not look in the mirror. A dab of powder. It would have to do.

"You promise to be here by dinner time? Anita, I can trust you? I'll send a man for your trunk in an hour."

Oh, the anxious note in the kind woman's voice!

"You're so good to me," she said. "I want to go home with you."

Yes, she wanted to go home. Everything was finished between her and Hal. It was as if she had died there on that red sofa.

5

Perhaps she would meet Hal in the street, swaggering along with Mrs. Lucas' money in his pocket. That very morning he had talked of plans; of Crawford and the South American. Not a word of the five thousand lire. She might never have known. He never would have paid it back, never. He knew that these people were from her own home. He knew why she had refused to take advantage of them. What a life she had lived—what a life! Oh, well, to-morrow she would be in a train—they would travel first class, of course—flying from it all. Sitting, perhaps, opposite Crawford. Could she bear those round blue eyes?

Never to see Florence again. Two blocks more; one block. Heavy, heavy feet. At last the ocher front of the *pension*. For the last time. Everything looked so strange.

From the end of the cheerless hall on their floor she heard him bellowing a cockney song. The rumbling bass voice turned her cold. He could sing then! He would go on singing and drinking after she was gone. Some day he'd be caught.

She opened the door. His shaving things were scattered over the washstand. Everything was in disorder.

"Hurry up, old girl," he chirruped. "We're to meet Monte at Doney's. You're coming with us to settle old Crawford."

"He's settled," she said deliberately, and leaned for a moment against the discoloured wall. She was going away, and he didn't know it yet. She had so many things to say to him first.

He swung around.

"What's the matter? Cheero!"

"Crawford won't be at your dinner."

Better to begin that way, slow and cold.

"What's that? What d'ye mean?" He stood in his shirt sleeves, suspenders hanging, red face gaping.

"He's leaving Florence to-morrow. I'm leaving, too."

Oh, that idiotic stare! She shook her shoulders, walked swiftly over to the bed, pulled out her old valise. Dust rose like a cloud of gnats. Her fingers were grimed. A strap broken. Never mind.

"You and Crawford!"

He was on her, his big hands pinching her shoulders, slewing her around. Purple. The man was purple. She made no attempt to move.

"No, I'm going home with Mrs. Lucas." She dripped it on him like acid.

His mouth opened slowly under the drooping moustache. Staring, he let go of her and collapsed in a chair, his knees apart, his hands loose between them.

"I don't get you," he said at last.

She started pulling drawers open, flinging things into the suitcase. She couldn't speak. Rags—rags

—shredded bits of silk, frayed linen, crumpled ribbons. What would they think—the maid and all?

It was his fault. He had driven her to it. She whirled on him.

"I know about the money! How could you, Hal? How dared you go to Mrs. Lucas, in my name, after all I said to you?"

"Nita, I'll explain. I swear I meant——"

"You've sworn enough. And I've got something else to tell you. D'you know who Crawford is? He's a partner of Stafford's. That's who he is! Remember those tapestries you sold to Rawston? Well, Crawford came here to get you. Understand? Get you!"

"Good Lord!"

"And he would have got you, too, if it hadn't been for Mrs. Lucas and Edith. He's engaged to Edith. You can thank them. Mrs. Lucas told me all about it. She's a real friend, that woman, the only friend I've ever had."

She was sobbing with anger. Bitter, bitter the tears, bitter the pain, the contempt in her heart. Go on, tell him—tell him how you've hated it all. Tell him of the nights you've lain in sickness and fear; of the days and days you've spent alone, waiting for something to happen. Tell him how you loathe that whiskey bottle standing over there, how you loathe his bloodshot eyes and his loud, boasting voice. Tell him about the Rawston boy losing

his place. Remind him of the others he has tricked and made you trick.

Her voice went on, terrible, pitiless, tearing and baring their poor, ugly life.

He listened dully, his fingers fretting at one another. Why didn't he say something? Why did he sit there like that?

"Haven't you anything to say for yourself?"

He rose then with a weighty movement of shoulders. She knew every one of his gestures. He was going to be noble.

"You're right, old girl," he said in a queer, husky voice. "I'm a rotter. Crawford's been damn decent, considering. And those friends of yours, too. Want you to go home with them, do they? Better go while the going's good."

"Hal, why did you take that money?"

"I swear I only borrowed it."

"Borrowed!" she lashed at him.

"Didn't think you'd take it so hard. Can't help it. Bad blood. Told you in the beginning. Never had any luck," he mumbled.

"Luck! Couldn't you work?"

He shook his head, passing a hand over his forehead.

"Too late. Might have once. You're right. Home and all that sort of thing. You've had a devilish hard time with me. No excuse."

Slowly he turned to the bureau, took up his collar, buttoning it on his stud with his old metal shoe

buttoner. His elbow in the air clumsily revolved; his face twisted as if the movement hurt him.

"What are you doing?" she cried sharply.

"Got to dine anyway with Monte; explain." He seemed to be having trouble with his words. "Monte's put a lot of money in this. Fifteen thousand, standing to get twice that. Don't know what he'll do, but he'll be mad as hell. Got to stand the racket. I introduced him to Crawford. My fault."

She watched him fumble in the drawer. He couldn't find anything, his hands trembled so.

"Your handkerchiefs are on the left side," she said mechanically.

He went over to the table, poured himself a drink, turned and came toward her.

"Nita, you've been a good little pal. Can't pretend I'm not knocked up a bit. But I don't blame you. Understand? Divorce me. Anything you want. Just remember one thing, will you? There's never been anyone else. Just you. See?"

He was close to her. She saw him in reds and purples, but shrunken like a punctured balloon. Yes, he'd been faithful. She knew that. But now —now that he would be alone! Another woman with Hal—younger, prettier! She could see the woman, see her in the room moving around, sitting at the table, mending. Trotting beside Hal on the street. She could see her at Doney's.

A knock on the door. Her heart jumped. It was

the maid peering in, sly, insolent. There was a porter downstairs with a handcart.

Let him wait. She walked over to the old window. In the rich deepening of that twilight she saw the man lolling beside the little cart; saw the hill beyond, wearing San Miniato, rose-coloured; saw the Arno, like a dead silver fish in a basket. She would never look out from this window again. The man would take her one shabby little valise and trundle it along the quays. The luggage of an adventurer, a nomad. She was ashamed, ashamed.

There was a ripping sound. What was that?

Hal had torn off his collar, tossed it down. He sat huddled on a chair, covering his face with his hands. She would never see him again. She would live in the little house in Stamford with her mother, hundreds of Ediths, Katharines fencing her in. They would call her Anita, and be sorry for her. They would be very kind. But they would wonder and talk. Then some day her mother would die.

Would they dine downstairs in the restaurant to-night? Would Crawford be there? No, they would send her dinner up to her on a tray, and they would come in quietly and kiss her. Where would Hal be? She remembered suddenly a girl they had seen around Doney's—a bold-eyed, well-dressed girl, a friend of Roddy Maxwell. Hal had said once he thought her pretty. Perhaps she would be the one. She crossed over by him, not touching him.

The mirror. Yes, that was she—powder streaked, the pleated frill at her neck all crushed. They would pretend they didn't mind, but they would notice in the days and days of the trip how worn she was. Taken out of her tarnished frame, removed from Hal—what would she be?

He said never a word; just sat there, beaten.

A piece of paper, a pencil, an envelope. Quick, she must write. "I won't leave Hal. He needs me. If you ever tell my mother, you'll kill her." The words sprawled over the page. She held the letter in her hand and marched on him.

"How much of that five thousand have you left?"

He motioned to the limp coat hanging over a chair. She darted roughly at the pocket. His wallet with his crest. His crest! Only four thousand in large bills. Perhaps in another pocket. Three one hundred bills, a few torn smaller ones, a few bits of silver, stamps.

"Where's the other seven hundred? You can't have spent it since yesterday?"

He lifted his head, staring at her with dull eyes.

"I paid the bill here. And there was yesterday's dinner. I bought a box of cigars. Sorry, Nita."

She stuffed the bills in the envelope, rang the bell. He watched her. The maid must have been waiting outside. She came at once.

"I say, Nita," he faltered, "I'm cleaned out, you know. Couldn't you——?"

She handed the envelope to the maid. "For the porter. He needn't wait."

She heard Hal stumble forward. She heard him stammer her name.

Nothing left, and she here—she and Hal.

"No, come back!" She opened the door and cried to the maid.

Quick, the envelope. She had even forgotten to seal it. All the better. Just a movement of her fingers slipping in and out. Three hundred lire. She held them crumpled desperately in her hand. Enough for to-night and to-morrow. This time she sealed the envelope, giving it to the maid.

"There, that's all," she said.

As she closed the door and turned around, Hal caught her in his arms. He held her tightly, fiercely —"You'll never regret it—never. I swear I'll make it up to you."

CHAPTER III

BIG GAME

I

HE had done his best to make it up to her. But it had not been easy to face Monte, and long afterwards she thought of the ugly scene between the two men—Monte's grace and charms stripped from him; Monte's quick Italian temper blazing out in threats which, fortunately, he dared not carry out.

It was Hal's South American friend who got them away from Florence. That's about all he did do, for when he discovered that Hal did not have influential friends in Paris who were to help put through a certain neat little deal in coffee, he expressed himself in explosive terms. It had been a very delicate business getting rid of him. And all the time there was the torturing fear that Mrs. Lucas might write her mother the truth. It took weeks to dispel that fear.

Weeks of lying low in a stuffy little hotel on the Riviera—a cheap place littered with second-rate English families, but near enough to Monte Carlo to permit Hal one of his favourite pastimes—roulette.

And actually, amazingly, luck was with him. He won enough to replenish their wardrobe, and to get them to Biarritz. That wasn't so bad.

There was always, however, that sense of unreality; of being in one city and then in another; of its suddenly being spring and then, as suddenly, autumn. She would have liked to have stayed with the sun all winter long, warming herself, thinking of nothing. It was Hal who had insisted on going back to Paris. Florence last winter, Paris this. What did it matter, after all, where they were?

But to have decided on Paris and come all the way, and then to have him change his mind! He hadn't said a word this morning. And an hour after he left the hotel, these expensive new trunks and a valise were delivered from him telling her to pack and to be ready when he came back in the afternoon.

Ready for what, she would like to know! He had gone off, she remembered now, in a suspiciously jaunty mood. She had imagined him conducting their latest friend Mr. Billings, of Billings Cracker Co., on a sociable tour among the Paris bars. She had even considered meeting them at the Chatham for a cocktail. Only the thought of Mrs. Billings, who was absurdly old-fashioned, deterred her. No use in antagonizing Mrs. Billings.

And then these new trunks had been plumped down on her. Well, she might as well pack. Nothing could be worse than this hotel. But how she

hated trunks! They were the symbol of her life. These trunks had an insolent look. They were overlarge, black and sleek, marked too conspicuously in red with Hal's crest. People asked indiscreet questions about crests.

The sight of her luncheon tray on the ink-spotted tablecloth made her sick. Nothing so loathsome as dead eggs congealed in their glue and violet stains of *vin ordinaire* on a coarse mussed napkin. Ring for the maid—no bell in the room. What could you expect for ten francs a day? The Billings paid four hundred francs for their suite in the Hotel du Rhin. Could the Billings have found out anything? The familiar fear crept prickling from head to knees. Fool she was to worry. Bad for the little lines that webbed her eyes; bad for the disciplined curve of her lips.

She didn't want to think of it. But as she turned from the glossy new trunks, she caught sight of the battered old trunk and valise huddled in a corner of the room. Their smudged labels looked at her knowingly. Florence. There it was—Pension dell' Arno, a smeared pinkish and black label, torn at the edge where she had tried to pull it off.

Better pack. She went to and fro with small anxious steps, her blue quilted wrapper pinned up with safety pins to prevent it from touching the dusty parquet floor. Chilled air oozed through the leaky windows. The fireplace was boarded up and papered over with the same pink as the walls—

a pink which, especially after she had been on a party, reminded her unpleasantly of her complexion. Against this surface of wilted brightness, the furniture hunched itself with a false cozy air: a scroll topped wardrobe, a brass bed, a nickel white washstand. You were meant to feel at home here. Reckless young Beaux Arts men who feared neither colds nor rheumatism nor indigestible food gave to the place what she supposed was a "student atmosphere." Mrs. Billings thought it so interesting and romantic to live around the corner from the Beaux Arts. Cheap in any case.

Well, she owned a few decent things now. Not enough to fill the trunks, though. Had she forgotten anything? She took from the closet her best evening gown of black chiffon trimmed with sequins. Not so seductive in the sickly grey light of a Paris November. Look at that now—sequins hanging on by a thread. She had been careless lately; hadn't kept her things up.

There wasn't very much to go in the valise. Hal's same old spotted dressing gown, his whiskey bottle standing on the washstand, the hair brushes. She should have washed the hair brushes, but with the amount of hot water one got in the mornings, washing anything but one's face and hands seemed an extravagance.

She slipped on her black serge suit with the embroidered pockets. The loose box effect of the jacket suited her. The great point was to move

and act as if you were thin. Of course she might go through a few exercises in the mornings, but bending and twisting about must be bad for the liver. It made her dizzy when she tried.

The bells of Saint Germain rang tarnished silver notes—one, two, three. She went to the window. Everything was dank and grey. Sweating pores of the city exuded mist that drained the colour of passersby. Not like the soft fragrance of Italy where flowers melted in the air, and there was song everywhere. Sounds here were harsh melancholy. She listened to the squawking of horns, the rumble of motor buses pounding down the narrow rue Bonaparte. Why didn't Hal come?

People dribbled past the bluish house fronts—a motor with a bored lady leaning back on upholstered cushions; a delivery wagon; a tall man stepping importantly (not Hal); a boy with a basket. Two taxis. At last here he was. About time.

One taxi was empty. Hal sat in the other, military of shoulder, very pleased with himself as she could tell by the angle of his hat. No bad news then. That second taxi must be for the trunks. The coolness of Hal taking for granted——

He looked up and waved. She ran to the door, opened it. She heard him heavy on the stairs, briskly marching up the hall.

"I thought you were never coming, Hal. What are we——?"

He bent to kiss her. He smelt of gin, cologne

and cigars. He had been with Billings then. He had also been to the barber, and he had bought himself a pair of pearl grey gloves to match his fedora.

"Everything ready? Good, old girl. Haven't time to explain—it's a surprise——"

He was going to be mysterious. She knew that deep tone of his, a breastwork against attack behind which he strutted red and hearty. She looked at him severely as, with a bright show of energy, he laid his hat, stick, and gloves on the table next to the gruesome luncheon tray, and strode toward the trunks. Very much engaged, he was, in admiring his crest.

"But, Hal, why are we leaving Paris? Have the Billings asked us anywhere?" She might have thought of that before. A motor trip, perhaps, through Nice, Cannes, Monte Carlo again. White casinos, mimosa, the blue of Southern seas. How she had missed them!

No, the Billings hadn't invited them anywhere. In fact, they weren't leaving Paris. Now was she satisfied? He prowled around the trunks, fussing with the locks.

"Not leaving Paris? Hal, you'd better tell me."

"Haven't time. You leave it all to me." He was fumbling now in the lower compartment of the wardrobe trunk where, wrapped in *Daily Mails,* were her slippers, his pumps, a heavy pair of boots.

"Hal, what *are* you doing?" It was just like him

to upset everything. Good gracious, these taxis waiting. Where was her hat? Hal flung a smouldering cigarette stub onto the floor. She picked it up, pressed it down with her thumb on the edge of the egg plate. Another stub wilted in a pool of water on the washstand.

She stood before the mirror. If he wouldn't tell her, why, he wouldn't. Powder her nose, anyway. You couldn't see a thing in this light. Her lips were chapped. She ran a finger over them, flecked off dried particles of skin; drew a bold red wing, leaning forward, her elbow steadied on the washstand shelf. How much should they give the *bonne?* Five francs was plenty.

"Hal, leave five francs for the maid on the tray, will you?"

Her toque needed brushing, and she had packed the brushes. Black velvet showed every speck of dust. Never mind. Drape her veil over it. You could do anything with lace veils. If only she knew where they were going! These surprises of Hal's——

Such a noise. She whirled about. He was hammering the brass trimmings of the trunk with one of his heavy boots which he had unpacked.

"Are you crazy?" She flew to seize his arm.

"Let go, Nita. I know what I'm doing." He peered down at her, flushed and determined. "They're too damn new. I'm breakin' 'em in."

"Breaking them——!" She stared at him. He

stood there, brandishing his shoe in midair, his mouth pouting under the bristle of his moustache. It was too absurd! She began to laugh. He joined in as if relieved at her manner of taking it, but while he roared and rumbled over his own performance, he banged away like a man with a purpose. He had some idea in his head, and he wasn't going to tell her.

"That's enough now." She spoke sharply. If he was up to anything queer, she would refuse to go through with it. She told him so.

He protested with a virtuous offended air. Evcrything was all right; pos-i-tively all right. Didn't she trust him?

"I wish to Heaven I could." No use losing her temper.

The trunks were ready. He went to the window, called to the chauffeurs.

Well, she should be accustomed by now to these sudden shifts. Funny about hotel rooms, how they cast off privacies and took on others. A change of linen and towels, a superficial sweeping and airing, and they were ready for the next strangers. A few stray hairpins on the table, a slice of green soap drowning in a soap bowl, an empty bottle of Hal's hair tonic, dead cigarette stubs, a rusty pen with which, only yesterday, she had written her monthly cheerful letter to her mother; the discarded old trunk and valise—just cast-off stuff—and that was all to tell of their passage.

The chauffeurs, reeking of sour wine, creaked in. Hal called from the hall—"Coming, Nita?"

She pulled the veil loosely over her face. "Yes, I'm coming."

2

Major and Mrs. Brassington-Welsh on the Champs Elysées, looking as if they spent their lives riding up the great highways of the world at the fashionable hour. It was all very well to start out this way at the glamorous hour before twilight when Paris lay soft under haze, and the bridges, the reddening chestnut trees, the statues and gardens were blended in grey and rose. But where would they be that night? She asked Hal once more. He wagged his head with a cunning triumphant look.

The Rond Point. Everyone was going to tea somewhere. People in beautiful motors, people on foot; smart young women with police dogs, dapper old men with red rosettes in their buttonholes. Ease and pleasure in the air. She relaxed dreamily. What did it matter where they went as they rolled on and on, swerving, dodging in and out. Polished shop windows, polished motors for sale. She thought of huge shaggy chrysanthemums, of a wood fire, of silver teapots.

Hal sprawled beside her, stroking his moustache with a grey-gloved hand, and staring ahead at the Arc de Triomphe which straddled the sunset.

Claridge's Hotel—the Carlton—swing around a

corner. These French chauffeurs were the most reckless——

Here and there lights flowered like pale jonquils. A black, hairy man stood on the Avenue Marceau holding a cluster of red and green balloons. Paris swam in a rosy mist. You only had to let yourself go.

"By the way, old girl, got any money?" He said it casually, as if it didn't matter whether she had or not.

"Have *you?*" But she fumbled in her purse. A hundred franc note, some of those brass coins that looked like gold, a wilted fifty centime bill mended with a strip of stamp paper.

He peered over her shoulder. "Lend me the hundred."

Lend it to him? A quaint way of putting it. He took it. Cocked his hat more boldly over a slightly bloodshot eye, and shifted to a brisker pose. "Here we are. Listen now, Nita, you leave everything to me."

The way he said that made her nervous. She strained forward, looking ahead. The taxi turned into one of those bleak expensive streets; drew up before a stone house of slender windows and carvings over a wide black door. Why, this wasn't a hotel!

"Wait here for me." Hal sprang out, rang the bell. She sat gaping up at the shapely façade. What did he——?

The door opened a crack. A little man peered suspiciously around the edge. Hal's shoulders moved in self-assured advance. The door opened wider on a vestibule. She saw Hal and the little man in animated talk, outlined against white steps. Hal took out his wallet, showed something that looked like a card. Put back his wallet, slid a hand in his pocket, appeared to be shaking hands with the little man.

Now he turned, blocking the doorway. His eyes seemed to march forward and give her orders. "Isn't it a bore, Nita? Monsieur Raton never got the Putnams' telegram. Must have gone astray—beastly service, isn't it?"

Monsieur Raton—a telegram—the Putnams! Her face twisted into some kind of idiotic expression. "Dear me—really!"

Hal gave her no time. "Well, now we're here, we'd better spend the night, anyway. What say, Nita?"

She said nothing.

"Ma femme est fatiguée. Ce voyage de Londres est mauvais." Hal turned to the little man, who flapped his shoulders and hands and stared sharply at the trunks in the second taxi.

So she had come from London, had she? Oh, why hadn't she insisted that Hal tell her what it was all about? He was at the taxi door, helping her out. He leaned close, his face secret, familiar. "It's all right. I'll explain later. Come on, Nita."

There seemed really nothing else to do. The Raton person bowed from the threshold—a mean little man with eyes like arithmetic, adding up. Hal, at her elbow, steered her along.

She was in a large hall. The chauffeurs, humped under the trunks, brushed past, wheezed up a circular staircase of white marble, Monsieur Raton, spidery, leading the way. A neat fat woman of pinkish surfaces, bulged, gaping from a doorway. Hal spoke to her in a loud assured voice. This was Madame Raton, no doubt? His friends the Putnams had so often spoken of her.

What were they doing here, and who were these Putnams? The name sounded vaguely familiar. Hal drew her into a room of soft shadows. Damask portières closed behind them. He snapped on a light. What a beautiful room! She clutched his arm, staring about at the creamy tints, the damask, the tapestries, the old gilded shapes and mirrors in which she saw reflected a little woman with very red lips, a tall, blurry-faced man.

She whispered—"Whose house is this?"

"Ours for the present. Be back in a moment." He nodded and grinned. Left her there.

Of course it was fantastic. A host or hostess would presently appear with nipped gestures of annoyance at being so intruded upon by unwelcome guests. She tiptoed over the Aubusson carpet, watching the door while she fingered ivories, old leather bound books. On a little marquetry table

stood the photograph of a young woman in a silver frame. Where had she seen that face before? A grand piano nosed forward from a corner of the room like a sleek animal waiting to be stroked. She longed to touch the keys. Didn't dare.

"Your room's ready, Nita." Hal's jovial voice startled her. He stood in the door, smiling at her. She followed him through the hall, up the stairs, into a pink and white room of rosewood and laces. There was a *chaise longue* heaped with embroidered cushions, a bed, canopied and festooned. The trunks showed up big and black against the light carpet.

"Hal, what does this mean?" She demanded an answer from under light flattened brows.

A finger to his lips, he tiptoed to the door, arched himself over the keyhole. Evidently no one there. Good! Then he turned with an engaging air of candour. Phew! I don't mind telling you, old dear, that I wasn't sure we'd get in. Lucky I happened to have Putnam's card and that hundred francs handy."

Oh, dear, she might have known that something was wrong. Her head felt hot. In that steam-heated room, torpor gained on her. Hal was looking at her brightly as if he expected her to pat him on the back and say "Clever boy!"

She took off her velvet toque that pressed on her hot head, ran her fingers through moist clinging hair. Well, now that he had "got in" as he put it,

she wanted to know how they were going to get out. "Better tell me everything, Hal. Who are these Putnams? What about that telegram that never arrived? I can't understand *why* you have to do these things." She looked at him wtih hard, bitter eyes. "Really, Hal, if you've got us into another mess, I'll never forgive you."

She would always forgive him. He knew it. "The Putnams? You remember them, Nita," he began in a chatty voice. But he wasn't so confident as he had been downstairs. "Here, old girl, you look tired. Do lie down." He fussed about her, led her to the *chaise longue,* propped cushions behind her back.

She wasn't going to be put off like that, though. "I'm waiting to hear, Hal."

"Well, now, don't you remember that night we had supper at the *Eléphant Rouge?* The Putnams sat next to us. Nice chap, Putnam. He and I had a long talk."

Those people! The woman in the silver frame was Mrs. Putnam, of course. But they didn't know the Putnams. Hal had picked the man up that night. "Why, Hal, we only saw them once. They were leaving for London or India or somewhere the next day."

"Pre-cisely." He dropped a thick lid over an eye, jiggled from heel to toe with a little seesaw motion. He acted as if, with extraordinary intelligence, she had guessed a riddle. But she wasn't going to help

him out so he had to continue. "They were leaving for London. You see you *do* remember, my dear. And then they're going off to India for a bit—big game hunting. Putnam wanted to rent this house. Told me all about it. You weren't listening."

"You don't mean to tell me that we're renting this house from the Putnams?" Her voice rose shrill, worried. She slid forward to the edge of the *chaise longue,* her feet touching the floor.

"Well, you might say it amounts to that." He fished for his cigarette case, lit a cigarette.

"Amounts to what? For Heaven's sake, Hal, don't throw matches on this carpet." Oh, he was exasperating! "Do the Putnams *know* we're taking their house?"

She had him there. Of course they didn't know. Mrs. Putnam would never rent her house to strangers. She remembered now the supper as through a mist of lights and music. A gay place the *Elé-phant Rouge.* Major Brassington-Welsh in a jovial vein, thrusting cigars, champagne, anecdotes on a new acquaintance. The Putnam woman hadn't liked it. Her cool ennui had been wafted like a thin draft from a distant source over her too sociable husband's blond head, reaching Hal, who hadn't felt it, reaching Nita, who had.

She taxed him again. "Hal, they don't know?"

How could they know when they were in London, he blustered. But he meant to write Putnam, of

course. Make it all right with him. A matter of business. If she would only *listen*——

"I'm listening—Hal, please don't throw ashes on the floor here. This isn't a hotel."

He went through an elaborate show of putting out his cigarette in a crystal receiver beside the bed. Now then, he could explain the whole affair quite simply.

When he was explaining anything, he always walked up and down as if he were on the deck of a ship that rolled a bit. It needed all his attention to keep his balance. She watched him.

It was like this, he said. Billings was thinking of opening a Paris Branch—*Biscuits Billings*—good idea, wasn't it? Have to find the right man, though, to direct the thing. What about Major Brassington-Welsh? Just the man for it. He stood a moment beaming upon her, twirling his moustache.

"Oh, Hal, has he said anything to you?" She had always hoped for something like this. Why, if it were true, it would be the most wonderful——

He patted her on the shoulder. Well, nothing was settled. Nothing ever could have been settled if they had stayed in that beastly hole of a hotel. What Billings wanted, of course, was a man with a solid background, a man with a clever little woman who could entertain. Billings knew the value of social prestige—no fool, Billings. He would expect——

"But, Hal, we don't know anyone to entertain. And this house—we have no right here."

"Now, Nita, we got in, didn't we? I tell you I'll fix it up with Putnam. Once I'm appointed director of an office here, you and I will have the finest little position ever——"

Suppose he were telling the truth! Suppose he *could* pay the Putnams later. Why shouldn't he? Oh, how she wanted to believe! She wished he wouldn't look sideways down his nose as if he were peeking at her from around a corner. Impress Billings. That wasn't a bad idea.

"But, Hal, if Billings doesn't give you that job? How could we ever make it right with the Putnams?"

"You leave that all to me." He looked so strong and sure of himself, as if everything were settled. The keys jingled as he bent over the trunks.

Give Hal his chance. It wouldn't do any harm to stay on here for a little while. Imagine waking up in this lovely room after that horrid little hotel; after all the hotels!

"Hal, don't unpack our old things. The Ratons will think——"

"Think what, my dear girl?" But he knew what she meant. "Any objections to my taking out my dinner jacket? Madame Raton is fixing us up a bite here."

"Let me, Hal. You're mussing everything." Yes, they had better dress. She would wear her

black satin. The sequin gown was too showy. Take a warm bath first in that beautiful white bathroom. What was Hal doing now? "For goodness' sake, don't take out that awful dressing gown. You can't wear that here."

He stood in his shirt sleeves, his hair rumpled. "What d'you want me to wear then to-morrow for breakfast?"

"Oh, I don't know. Your mauve pyjamas are all right. Lock the trunks again." She fluttered to the closet, hung up her black serge, her sequin gown. The hangers were padded and smelt of sachet. There were dozens of them, and places for shoes and——

"Nita, where's the whiskey?" Hal shouted from the bathroom.

"You're not going to drink that horrid stuff now?"

"Just a snack. I've got a glass here. Must have caught a bit of a chill driving up."

Get him his beastly bottle. "You can't leave it out, Hal. Hide it in the clothes hamper—— Do rinse the glass——"

"Oh, hell, Nita, what's the matter with you!" Grumblings and rumblings from the bathroom.

The black satin did very well. Just the note for a quiet evening. The chiffon in the neck needed changing. She must get some to-morrow. You never got tired of black satin.

"Nita, what say if we get the Billings up here

after dinner?" Hal stood admiring himself in the mirror.

She didn't want the Billings to-night.

She and Hal sat alone in the large tapestried dining-room. The round table was like a glassy pool in which rose-coloured lights were softly reflected. A simple dinner indeed! Pheasant, endive salad, Brie cheese and a tart. Chablis that gleamed topaz in their glasses. Her smile lifted her face into radiance. She moved her shoulders and wrists daintily. Talked in a low polite voice, careful of what she said. Raton might understand English.

Raton nearly spoiled everything. His little eyes added up and added up as he padded about the table. He was like a small sly animal, sniffing things out. She wished he wouldn't apologise so much. He apologised because Monsieur and Madame had put their silver away. He apologised for the dinner. Madame Raton presented her excuses. It was true that in her time she had been cook in very great houses.

It wouldn't do to be too enthusiastic. Hal overdid it, she thought. She must warn him not to be too familiar with this Raton person. Smile upon him with a shade of condescension. Yes, everything was quite delicious. Of course it was a picnic!

They were both in the *salon* among those lovely things. Hal smoked his cigar, she lit a cigarette.

"You look rippin' to-night, old girl."

She drifted to the piano. She hadn't played for

years. Hal lounged over to her side. She tilted her head to smile at him. Good old Hal! Her fingers moved shyly touching the keys. Try simple melodies—a false note—never mind. Hal's ear was not critical. He nodded, and hummed out of tune.

Strange how she felt, sad with a kind of yearning and yet happy with Hal anchored there beside her. He and she hadn't been like this for a long time. Why couldn't it always be like this?

"I say, trot us out something a bit gayer, Nita."

One of those jazz tunes, he meant. She tried. Jangled a syncopated chord, but somehow it didn't go here. She was growing sentimental. She thought of her mother, of the days when she used to take piano lessons. How she had hated to study!

Hal was good to her. He *was* good to her.

3

Hal was bringing Billings back that afternoon. She waited for them in the *salon*. If it hadn't been for the Ratons, and Putnam ghosts in the air (very snippy ghosts at that), she might have spent a pleasant day alone in the house. She had sent Hal off because she wanted to be alone. But from the moment she left her room, the Ratons sneaked after her. If she went upstairs, one of them managed to be there, if she went downstairs, she bumped into the other one. It was either Madame Raton

wheezing from a scramble up the back stairs, pretending to straighten rugs in the wide gallery overlooking the hall, or it was Monsieur Raton puttering about the dining-room. You would have thought they expected her to steal something; to pick the locks of the cellar and linen closet, or to secrete in the simple folds of her blouse and skirt, any of the small rare ornaments which might happen to take her fancy.

Their busy innocent manner didn't deceive her. "Did Madame ring?"— "Would Madame like any help unpacking her trunks?"

"No—no, thank you. Quite all right, thank you."

Madame Raton had a pulpous caterpillar smile that seemed to crawl away when she thought you weren't looking. For a fat woman, she moved with a treacherous speed, silent as a Japanese. Monsieur Raton's shoes squeaked.

If this was the way they took care of the house, no wonder there was dust everywhere. She knew how a house should be kept up. There were handsome houses in Stamford. Mrs. Mason's, for instance, with all that old Colonial stuff in it, and her own mother's house, which wasn't so grand but which, at least, shone bright and speckless.

Those Ratons caught her dusting with her handkerchief the old refectoire table in the hall. They didn't like it, of course. Monsieur Raton venomously apologised—"If we had known that Mon-

sieur and Madame were coming, we should have had the house in order. It is regrettable that the telegram from Monsieur Putnam did not arrive."

Oh, yes, the telegram! Better speak softly and smile. "We are very comfortable, thank you."

Now she had shut herself in the *salon*. But she couldn't close out the Putnams. She felt them everywhere: in the subdued arrangement of rich objects, in polished surfaces, in damask and high ceilings. She moved the photograph of Mrs. Putnam to a darker corner. Hateful, those slender-necked anæmic women! She could imagine Mrs. Putnam in a tea-gown receiving guests. Well, she didn't have a tea-gown, and anyway Billings never took tea. Should she change into the black satin and pretend an early dinner? Those Ratons were prowling around outside. Stay as she was, rather than bump into them again.

If only Hal had settled things with Billings! A decent job was the solution. She must manage somehow—Billings admired her—those large, white-faced men had more red blood in them.

That was the doorbell. She heard Hal's voice, round and hearty. She hurried forward.

Hal hadn't settled anything except probably bills for several rounds of drinks. One look at him was enough. Not a care in the world. He brought with him the warm pungent atmosphere of cafés, the generous ease of good fellows. Billings gripped her hand. She toned her own greeting to the room.

Mrs. Billings was well, she hoped? So glad he'd come. He was their first visitor. What did he think of their new quarters?

"It's great. Beats any hotel I've ever been in." He had a trick of half closing his eyes. His voice drifted. His large white face took on a deceptively dreamy expression. He looked at her. She wished she had put on the black satin.

"That's what I've been telling him all day. Finest house in Paris," Hal boisterously put in. "Nothing like it. Your own home. The best little woman in the world waiting for you. Nothing too fine for her. You'll have to admit that, old man." A bit throaty the way he said that.

Billings admitted that nothing was too fine for her. As if on springs, his eyes opened wide, intensely alive, intensely blue.

Her lips could take on a lovely, an alluring curve. She smiled with a tilting motion of head, a loosening of the little clutching lines around her eyes. "Well, if we're to stay in Paris, it's nicer to have a house." Very neatly hinted, she thought.

"Better come to the States, Major, and bring the Missis." Billings strolled about, his hands in his pockets, bending to squint at an ornament. The room seemed to make him restless. He sank finally into a tapestried armchair.

"Take a house here. That's the way to know a country." Hal thrust out his chest, straddling a flowered design on the rug. "Meet the right people.

Entertain and all that sort of thing. England's the place, though. If we were all in England now, you'd be staying with us in Brassington Hall. Finest old——"

She got near enough to him to lay a hand on his arm. Pretty picture. Little green-eyed woman smiling up at her big good-natured husband. Her fingertips dug in, pinched.

"Ouch, Nita. What the devil——?"

"Poor old dear, your neuritis again?" He knew perfectly well what she meant. Some day, someone would accept one of these vague invitations. Then what——!

"Hal, perhaps Mr. Billings would like a highball?"

"Certainly—certainly. Good idea." With a promising air of hospitality, he bustled out.

Billings, deep in the cushioned chair, was staring at her feet. Well, she wasn't ashamed of them, especially in these patent leather slippers. But if she were Mrs. Billings, she wouldn't trust a man with an eye like that. The way he looked at women in restaurants! His idea of Paris, probably. Better be a little careful. Bright, but not too coquettish.

"Hal's like a child with a new toy," she said indulgently. "So full of enthusiasm. He's that way about everything. Don't you think enthusiasm is valuable in business, Mr. Billings?"

"Sure." He looked at her curiously. Swung a leg over his knee.

She had to go on now. She sat down near him, not too near. Spoke in an intimate confiding manner. "D' you know I'm very ambitious for Hal." She shouldn't sound too eager. "You big men aren't the only ones who want power." Say that lightly with a little laugh. "Give Hal a chance to make good and——"

"Hasn't he made good?" Quite another Billings, this. Blue eyes boring through her.

That was a mistake. "Of course," hastily. "But you know how it is. Hal's had so many offers since the war. He wants to find just the right thing—something with a future. He'd like to be here in Paris for a while anyway——"

"Don't blame him." Billings, suddenly genial, lifted himself with one of his brisk movements from his chair; strolled toward her. "You're a wonderful little saleswoman," he said.

Now what did he mean by that? "Look here, Mr. Billings, I'm not——"

"That's all right. Everyone sells things, don't they?"

She didn't like his tone. Keep her hands still in her lap, keep her feet still. Wished her cheeks didn't feel so hot. "Sells or buys—at bargain prices," she retorted.

How he laughed, the insolent creature! But he stopped short, smooth as a high-powered machine. "I'm always ready to look over a bargain," said he.

"Perhaps you don't know, Mr. Billings. We took this house because Hal tells me that you——"

"Here we are!—here we are!" Hal had to blunder in followed by Raton, who peered inquisitively at Billings from between the necks of bottles on a tray he carried. He set the tray down, sidled out.

Ice clinked in tall glasses. Hal, the jovial host, presided over the tray. "A wee nippie, old girl?"

"No, thank you. Hal, I was just saying to Mr. Billings that you'd be the very person to manage——"

"*Look* out— Sorry!" Hal tipped over a bottle. Caught it in time.

He'd tipped that bottle on purpose. His voice boomed on and on, filling the room. Very amusing no doubt, those old stories of his. Billings laughed. The smell of whiskey and cigar smoke coarsened the air.

For some reason, Hal didn't want her to interfere. You never knew with Hal what he wanted. But this time she wouldn't stand any nonsense. Suddenly, she hated their voices, hated their faces, hated the way they lounged around smoking and drinking.

"Nita, wake up, old thing." Hal stood ruddily over her. "Billings suggests that we make a night of it. Stop at his hotel for Mrs. Billings. We'll dine at the *Eléphant Rouge*."

"I'm a little tired." She meant him to see that she wasn't pleased.

"Come on, Mrs. Welsh," Billings urged.

She hated to be called Mrs. Welsh. "Really, I——"

"Be a sport, Nita." They stood on either side of her, tall men, red and white.

She wasn't going to be left alone all evening. "Oh, all right. I'll have to dress, though."

"Good girl." Hal, very expansive, patted her on the back. "Like to see the house, Billings, while we're waiting for Nita?"

She'd wear her sequin gown. Didn't matter if the men weren't in dress clothes. Mrs. Billings would look dowdy, of course. All the better.

4

Was there ever such a nuisance! In the sequin gown and a large black hat which shadowed the gold of her hair and brought out evening lights in her eyes, she had deliberately keyed herself up to the occasion. In spite of Hal's irresponsible behaviour, she meant that very night to coax Billings into promising that he would open a Paris branch for his biscuits.

Now here she was waiting for Mrs. Billings in the drearily rich atmosphere of the Billings' private *salon,* from whose windows she could gaze, for distraction, on the handsome proportions of the Place Vendome. The two men had gone on, as they said, to order dinner. They had gone on, in reality, to

escape waiting for anyone who was not in their festive mood. Mrs. Billings hadn't liked being fetched to make a night of it. Billings hadn't liked her not liking it, and had told her so in the curt tones of a man accustomed to command.

She couldn't help, in her own invested brightness, serving as a contrast to the bleached manner of Billings' wife. Hardly tactful of him, though, to point out Mrs. Brassington-Welsh as an example of liveliness to be followed. She wasn't so sure that Mrs. Billings couldn't have answered back, precipitating the domestic crisis that had hung for a moment, unexploded, in the air. But Mrs. Billings had only looked at her husband with those quiet brown eyes of hers, and said she would go.

She had been dressing now for over half-an-hour. Heavens, what chances that woman wasted! All those clothes and nothing fit to wear; all those jewels and she never wore them.

Wonder what she could be doing in there! No harm in tiptoeing to the door and listening. There came a faint sound that she recognised. She knocked gently; opened the door.

Mrs. Billings lay on the bed, face downwards, a limp slender figure in a plain corset cover and starched petticoat. There were clothes on the floor, clothes on chairs: the contents of boxes and closets littered about; a jewel case open on the dressing-table.

Mrs. Billings was crying. Strange to see another

woman cry. Should she tiptoe away again? Billings' fault, this. Brutes men were.

Mrs. Billings lifted her head. She must hate to be seen like this. "I have a headache. I don't think I can—" She flopped back on the bed.

Of course it wasn't any of her business. The evening would be more successful from every point of view without Mrs. Billings. But it would be rather beastly to leave now. There had been nights, she remembered, when lying beside Hal in the stale darkness of hotels she had cried just as Mrs. Billings was crying. And she had something to cry about, too. "Don't you think it might do you good?" she said a little formally.

Mrs. Billings tried a moment for control. "I can't—oh, I can't."

Very well then, she couldn't. You couldn't force her to go. "Can I get you anything? Perhaps some aspirin——"

"It isn't the headache. I'm ashamed of myself for acting this way. Mrs. Welsh, if I could only make you understand. I'm not the kind of woman to break down over trifles." She got up from the bed with a resolute movement, smoothing back loose strands of hair.

After all, women had a rotten hard time of it in this world. "Look here, Mrs. Billings, I shouldn't let anything that your husband said——"

"It isn't his fault, it's mine." Mrs. Billings faced her, suddenly animated. "For years he's worked

with an idea of coming over here for a real holiday. I never wanted to come. You're an American, aren't you, Mrs. Welsh? Perhaps you know, then, what it is to feel homesick."

Yes, she knew. But Mrs. Billings could *go* home sooner or later, and find her house, her friends, her charities; whereas she—well, that was another story.

"I don't want to be selfish," Mrs. Billings continued with a sigh. "But when I think that Mr. Billings wants to spend a year over here, it's almost more than I can bear. It seems to me such a waste when you have a home of your own and responsibilities, don't you think so, Mrs. Welsh? I tell my husband that, and he says I spoil everything for him."

It was strange being here alone with Mrs. Billings and hearing her talk like that. (Wonder if there was any decent powder on the dressing table—probably only talcum.) "A year passes quickly." That was trite enough consolation.

"Did you know, Mrs. Welsh, that I was Mr. Billings' secretary before we married?" Mrs. Billings stood very intense in her ribbonless corset cover and crumpled white petticoat. "Yes, for six years. It was absorbing work. Mr. Billings is an absorbing man. He depended on me then. And he expects the same efficiency from me in this kind of life as I could give him in our business relations. But you see, I can't. I haven't the training."

It needed, indeed, quite a lot of training to keep up with Billings. "Why do you let him absorb you?" She sounded a little impatient. Eight o'clock, and those men waiting at the *Eléphant Rouge*. She was hungry—Billings would be furious.

"I don't know whether you can understand, Mrs. Welsh. You're so sure of yourself socially, so gay and brilliant. My husband thinks you're the cleverest woman he ever met."

She could smile at that. A glance in the mirror showed her a large black hat under which the smile gleamed like a red stitch. If she were clever, she would be attending to her dinner and business at the *Eléphant Rouge* this moment.

Mrs. Billings moved nervously to and fro. Came toward her to clasp her hand. "I feel I need a friend—I—oh, Mrs. Welsh, what *shall* I do? I haven't told you everything. He leaves me alone so much of the time. I just sit here and wonder where he is, and when he comes back he's irritable, and critical. I don't know what to do."

"Suppose you dress." She was beginning to like Mrs. Billings.

"I look a fright in everything I put on."

"You have no right to look a fright." Do her good to shake her up a bit. "If you want to please your husband——"

"I see that." Mrs. Billings was crying softly again. "It's this life here. He never used to care for such things."

"Don't you believe it. They always do when they get a chance. You're a very lucky woman, Mrs. Billings. You don't know how lucky. Why, if I—" Stop right there. This friendship game led into deep waters.

Mrs. Billings was staring at her with a sympathetic expression. "Aren't you happy? Why, I thought—oh, I don't mean——"

Throw your head back, Nita. Laugh. "I?—I'm ridiculously happy. But really we must hurry. Will you let me advise you about your get-up to-night? I think I can suggest a few things—" What a fool she was! Educating this young woman who, if smartly dressed, would most certainly discover and use her fresh attractions on an evening when she, Nita, needed to charm alone.

Mrs. Billings flushed a becoming rose colour. "You're wonderful."

It was something to be wonderful! She went briskly to the clothes closets. Heavens, where had the woman found all these hideous expensive gowns. Two closets packed full, not to mention the stuff littered around the room. How could you choose out of all these things! "May I see that one—the red velvet?"

"Oh *that!*" Mrs. Billings raised her quite lovely arms to reach the dress. "I've never worn it. Isn't it a little too conspicuous?"

"It won't hurt you to be conspicuous." Might as well go the whole way now she'd started.

"Where are the scissors?" Clip—snip—pull off a silly gold tassel, a large red flower at the waist. "Can I have that black jet ornament I see on that blue dress over there? And if I can have a needle and thread——"

Mrs. Billings hovered over her, flushed, excited. "Shan't I ring for my maid? I hate you to bother."

No bother at all. If Mrs. Billings only knew what familiar work it was—ripping, adjusting, fixing over. Well, she never thought that she'd be doing anything like this for another woman. She stood up, flecked away loose threads that clung to the sequins.

"Now then, sit down, and I'll do your hair."

"How can I ever thank you?"

Fine spun brown hair that slipped like water through one's fingers. Have it waved to-morrow. For to-night, draw it back from that low rather good brow, slink it over the ears, snuggle it tight in the back. Her fingers moved swiftly. A large tortoise-shell comb—the very thing. Now powder, rouge for the lips.

"Do you think my husband will like me to make up this way?"

"Rather nice women rouge their lips, you know."

"Oh, I didn't mean——"

She might be a splendid secretary, but as a woman of fashion she was in her infancy. Here now, the dress. It draped itself around the slim figure. Jewels. What jewels that woman had.

"My pearls are in the safe downstairs."

Oh, she was beginning to be interested, was she? "Never mind. These will do." Should say they would do. Fascinating long ruby earrings, a ruby brooch, ruby rings.

"There you are."

A long mirror gave back a tall young woman in supple red velvet; red lips parted, silky brown hair folded in a casque around a small head. The young woman smiled.

The telephone. Mrs. Billings, before the mirror, paid no attention to it. Of course it was Hal.

"That you, Nita? What the devil is the matter? Why don't you and Mrs. B. come along?"

"We're coming, Hal." There, now, in her hurry, she tore her sleeve. No time to mend anything either. She saw herself in the mirror next to Mrs. Billings. Perhaps if she tilted her hat a bit, it would be smarter. Large hats, after all, made one look shorter. Not when you were sitting at table, though.

"Shall I wear a hat?" Mrs. Billings was pulling out more boxes.

"No, go as you are." She felt tired and hungry. Perhaps she had better take a stitch in that sleeve. Quick then.

"This sealskin is all right, isn't it?" Mrs. Billings held up a magnificent fur.

"All right?— Oh, yes. Rather." There were

limits to what one woman could be expected to do for another.

"I never can tell you how grateful I am. You look tired, Mrs. Welsh. It's my fault, keeping you from your dinner."

"Tired! I'm never tired!" She leaned back in the limousine that carried them smoothly through street after street, all lighted and gay. Shops, cafés, people moving briskly. She wished she were going home to bed.

The *Eléphant Rouge*. It was almost worth it to see Hal's and Mr. Billings' expressions as Mrs. Billings, a little self-conscious, made her way to the table where the two men stood.

No chance of getting anything out of Billings to-night. He sat there now his face turned toward his wife like a powerful limelight in which she glowed with increasing animation. Hal, in a magnificent mood, rumbled out compliments. He had never seen Mrs. Billings look so well. That gown she had on was simply ripping.

"Nita, my dear, we'll have to get you something like it. Red's the colour—eh, Billings? I always tell Nita——"

"While you're about it, you can buy me rubies and a sealskin coat," she said sweetly. That held him quiet. Oh well, better enjoy herself. Billings was paying this time for the dinner. Another glass of Pommeroy? Yes, thank you. The *poulet en cocotte*

was delicious. Her lips curled, uncurled, curled again.

A little over a week ago, she and Hal had been sitting at the small table opposite where now sat a fleshy old satyr gobbling his food. He thought she was staring at him and leered with piggish eyes. A painted young woman in black velvet with huge pearls in her ears and a pale young man sat sipping liqueurs at the table the Putnams had had that eventful night. Same background; same red elephant balloons floating in the thickening air; same excited faces, bored faces, hands holding glasses, cups, cigarettes. A fox trot; couples see-sawing.

Strange how life went. If Hal hadn't picked up Putnam that night, where would they be now? Back in the soiled pink room of the little hotel. Where would they be to-morrow? If Billings didn't——

Mrs. Billings smiled tenderly at her. Not a bad sort, Mrs. Billings, after all.

Hal was bragging. She knew that tone. Better look after him. His loosened tongue wagged like a bell. "Remember when we were here last, Nita? The Putnams——"

"The Putnams!" from Mr. and Mrs. Billings. "The *Gerald* Putnams?"

Oh, if she could only reach Hal's foot. Make him look at her. What did he have to go and drag in the Putnams for! Change the subject quickly. "Hal, dear, do you remember the last time we heard that 'Blues' they're playing? Makes me want to

dance. Is there anything more fascinating than these new jazz tunes?" Fingers on the table tapping the rhythm. Mrs. Brassington-Welsh, suddenly very gay; green eyes greener, light brows lifted.

"Eh? The 'Blues'? Yes—oh, yes!" Hal looked as if she had waked him up in the middle of the night.

"Putnam used to be in the automobile business," Billings pursued. "Great friend of ours, wasn't he, Mary? Someone told us he was in Paris. I'd like to see him again."

Hal had to blunder on. "Gone to India after big game. Nice chap. Don't care much for his wife."

"I wish we could have seen him," Mrs. Billings said in a lively voice. She kept tasting the red on her lips like a child eating candy. "He used to come into the office all the time. He and I got on famously. You never knew, Bert, but he tried to get me away from you when his secretary left him to marry." That was what a half a glass of champagne did to *her!* Billings didn't like it. You could see he was annoyed, the way he thrust out that jaw of his.

Hal grew fussy, purplish about the cheeks. Accepted a cigar, lit it, and on an artificial gust of good cheer, launched on one of his oldest stories.

Coffee. Liqueurs. A drop of cognac would do her good. No use to worry, but if Billings ever heard now that the house belonged to Putnam, he would think it queer. She didn't like it. Didn't like it one

little bit. She felt as if someone had slid a small chunk of ice down her back.

They were going on to a musical Revue, then to supper. Mrs. Billings nestled up to her in the motor.

"Oh, I'm having such a good time, and it's all your doing, Mrs. Welsh. Will you come shopping with me, to-morrow? You'll tell me what to get, won't you?"

Yes, she would go shopping. Yes, it *was* fun, wasn't it? She adored these parties. No, Hal didn't dance. His game leg, you know.

Would the evening never end? It was positively indecent the way Billings flirted with his wife. Wish the Putnam name hadn't come up. You never knew what might happen.

5

The Billings were coming to dinner. Hal never should have invited them to the house with the Ratons in such a poisonous temper, and everything going wrong.

It was all very well to have brought Billings and his wife together. You couldn't wedge them apart since he had seen his wife in that red velvet gown. The money he spent on her, and the money she let him spend! Shopping every day. Gowns, lingerie, hats. And the coiffeurs, manicures, masseuses, swarming about. You wouldn't know Mrs. Billings. But you could see how, when once she made up her

mind to a thing, she could carry it through. Yes, she was certainly efficient, and really quite a decent sort. No end grateful, too. Insisted on giving "dear Nita" (it was Nita now) a few rather lovely presents. With the background of the house and all accepting these things didn't imply humiliation. That lace morning cap, for instance, matched the lace and rosebuds in the bedroom, and the fur-lined slippers went with her quilted blue wrapper. Of course the black lace tea-gown from Paquin and the hat from Madeleine were a bit exaggerated as gifts from an acquaintance. But it wasn't as if she were accepting commissions from dressmakers and modistes for showing Mrs. Billings around. Hal told her she was a fool not to do just that.

He had been in a vile temper all week, stalking about with that mottled bloodshot look he got when he was worried. She couldn't help it if he were worried. It was his own fault. He hadn't written Putnam. At least he wouldn't say he had, and he wouldn't confess he hadn't. And, as for being Director of any Paris Branch, it was another of those beautiful dreams of his. Probably Billings had said —"Some day I may open a Paris Branch. Think Billings Biscuits would go here, Major?" And Hal had seen it all done. If he would only leave it to her, she might, through Mrs. Billings, work something out. No hope of reaching Billings direct any more.

Meanwhile, the Ratons had drained Hal dry. She

knew, because while he was taking his bath, she had examined the contents of his wallet. Lean as a fasting priest, it was. And only yesterday he had had a beastly scene with Raton, ending very unwisely in Hal's calling Raton a blinking bloodsucking rat. Which was true enough, but hardly helpful. Nor was it pleasant for her when Hal, after cursing Raton in French and English with a little Arabic thrown in, had stayed out with Billings the entire day, coming back to announce this dinner for the following evening, in so cheerful a mood that she had felt more worried than ever. What made him so suddenly cheerful? He seemed to think it a huge joke when she told him that she had seen Raton sneaking out of the corner Post and Telegraph Office, late yesterday afternoon. What was he doing there, she would like to know?

"Don't you bother your head, old girl," Hal had said.

But she was bothering. Here was the dinner. Hal had hired a man to wait on the table; had ordered flowers, wine, Heaven knew what. Madame Raton's caterpillar smile crawled over the preparations, spoiling the roses in their vases, the damask table-cover, the crystal and silver which Hal had somehow wheedled out of the closets. Just showing that the Ratons must have had the keys all the time. She distrusted their eagerness to please. She distrusted Raton's smile, which was like butter smeared over a very sharp knife.

Well, she looked her best that evening, slowly sweeping down the stairs in the black lace tea-gown, her hair waved and coiled high in the new fashion Mrs. Billings' coiffeur had taught her. Hal came down, brushed and scrubbed, smelling of eau de cologne. He did know how to wear evening clothes.

The bell. Ridiculous to feel so nervous.

Mrs. Billings' manner seemed a little strained. Wonder what was the matter with her. Billings and Hal whispered in a corner. It was a relief when dinner was announced. If she had money, how she would love to entertain always this way. Sitting here in black lace, presiding over polished silver and napery, smiling at Billings, smiling at Hal, who sat solid and jovial opposite; smiling at Mrs. Billings, who made an effort to be gay.

As they rose from the table to saunter across the hall to the *salon,* Mrs. Billings clasped her arm and whispered—"I don't know what I shall do without you."

"Without me? Are you going away?" She was so startled that she raised her voice. She didn't want Mrs. Billings to go away.

"It's a shame. I really think you should be—" Mrs. Billings began.

Billings came up with the genial air of a man who has dined well. "Mary dear, the Major wants to show you those miniatures he was telling you about." Mrs. Billings hesitated a moment, but Hal called to her from the *salon.* She went.

Billings glanced down smiling, his eyes half closed. Even the pearls in his glossy shirt looked dreamy, contented. "You certainly gave us one great little dinner," he said.

"Are you going away?" She asked it abruptly, and let her eyes shine full and green at him under the hanging alabaster lamp of the hall.

He seemed hugely amused. Laughed. "I guess not."

"Then what did Mary mean——?"

The hired butler appeared with coffee and liqueurs. Hal came out with a box of cigars. Billings turned briskly as if relieved at the interruption.

Run upstairs a moment. Her nose felt shiny, her nerves were on edge. How quiet her room was! Turn on the light. She would like to stay here away from them all. Now what had Mary Billings meant? Either they were going away or Hal hadn't told her——

A knock on the door. It was Raton. He sidled in, peering about, his mean little face twisted with malice. "Is Monsieur here?"

You only had to look at him. He'd been drinking. He knew perfectly well that Hal was downstairs. "Monsieur is not here." Her tone dismissed him.

But he nosed further into the room, shifty and sly. "The maître d'hotel wants his money before he goes. It's three hundred francs."

Three hundred francs! "It's impossible," she said

sharply. Caught herself up. Better be careful; avoid a scene.

He straddled in front of her, his thin little legs like hair-pins, his beady eyes adding up. "Three hundred francs," he repeated, and edged closer, his voice all oily and smooth—*"Vaut mieux être raisonnable, ma petite dame. On peut toujours s'arranger."*

Better give him the money. She didn't have it. "You will have to speak to my husband." She turned away; didn't want to look at him.

He whirred behind her like an angry insect. *"Ah, c'est comme ça!* But it shall not pass like this. I know what I know——"

If only the blood didn't rush so to her cheeks! She tried to answer quietly—"You know nothing. I shall tell my husband of this, and to-morrow——"

"To-morrow!" He fairly danced in front of her, his voice thin and shrill, rising. "And I who have risked losing my place. To-morrow it will be too late. I have—" he stopped abruptly.

The creature had played them some rotten trick. Yesterday—the Post Office—oh, she had warned Hal! And now perhaps it was too late. She must find out. "Monsieur Raton, calm yourself. If we owe you any——"

Off he went again, higher, shriller. "My wife was right. You have not even three hundred francs. *Voulez-vous que je vous dise, Madame—eh bien—"* He thrust his mean little face close to hers. "You

are nothing in spite of your fine trunks and your airs. You do not belong here. You are no——"

"May I come in, Nita?" Mrs. Billings stood there in the door, looking at Raton as if he were a spot at her feet. It took a tall woman in a gold dress and pearls to look that way.

Raton fidgeted, muttered and sneaked toward the door.

Had she better explain? No—never explain. But how much had Mary Billings heard! She must say something. "All French servants are alike. They think they can rob you. They——"

"He was drunk, wasn't he?" Mary Billings moved quietly to the dressing-table.

There you were now. Suppose she had started explaining, getting all mixed up when it was so simple. Of course he was drunk. But she wished her fingers wouldn't tremble as she opened the dressing-table drawer, got out fresh cotton for her friend, took off the crystal lid of the powder box. Dear me, this would never do. Her face showed blotchy under the powder. Little lines set her eyes in quotation marks, and her lips sagged at the corners. Mary Billings, over her shoulder, was reflected smooth and young. Not so young either. Possibly thirty. But when a woman has nothing to worry her——

Embarrassing, this silence. Mary Billings broke it suddenly. "Nita, do you know that your husband has been called to London within a few days on a

very important business matter, and that he expects you to spend the winter there with him?"

She found nothing to say. Nothing. Must have looked like an imbecile, staring.

"Well, I think you should know." Mrs. Billings came nearer, put a hand on her arm. "He asked us not to tell you, but I think it's all wrong the way men treat women—not telling them anything. He wanted to spare you, he said, until the last moment. But he knew yesterday and he came right to Bert about it. We were only too glad, of course, to take the house off his hands."

"Take *this* house? You're taking this house?" Why, they couldn't take this house.

"Yes, we're sub-letting it for the winter. Nita, you don't mind? If there's anything I can do I wish you'd tell me."

"No, there's nothing." Her voice was strained. It was inconceivable that Hal should do this thing. He must have thought it up since yesterday, that business in London and all.

"I'm glad it's all right." But Mrs. Billings, as she moved toward the door, didn't sound as if it were all right.

Call her back. No use. What could you tell her? Better let her and Billings get away and then have it out with Hal. Oh, yes, she would have it out with Hal.

They had reached the head of the stairs. What was Raton doing there in the hall? The doors of

the *salon* were closed. Wasn't that a taxi outside? Yes, it stopped, and Raton slid forward toward the vestibule.

"Wait a moment, Mary, please." They were still on the top steps. Mary Billings turned.

A key scraped in the front door. She could see the hall, the vestibule. The front door opened.

Then Mary Billings, light on her feet, flew down. "Mr. Putnam! Wherever did you——?"

Well, now they were in for it. Raton had telegraphed, of course. What could she do? Go upstairs—hide—go downstairs? Her knees would give way if she moved. She must get to Hal. Must warn Hal. Creep a step down. She heard Putnam's voice, unfamiliar—"Mary Billings! Where on earth?—I thought——"

Slip down the last steps. If only they didn't see her! Putnam stood slender and blond in his dark travelling suit. That little beast of a Raton hovering in the background, touched his arm. He looked up, recognised her.

The *salon* door opened noisily. Hal blew full tilt into the hall, a large cigar in his mouth.

There was nothing she could do now. Nothing.

You really had to admire Hal. For a second he stood clamped to the floor. Then he braced himself with an upward heave of his shoulders and bore down, a bit too red and hearty. "By Jove, if it isn't Putnam! Well, well, old chap, this is a surprise. Sent you a telegram yesterday. Just come in here a

moment, and I'll explain." He took the blond young man by the elbow and tried to tow him into the dining room.

You could see that Putnam didn't know quite what to do. And then Billings appeared. Hurried forward, exclaiming; almost shook Putnam's hand off. If Hal would only keep quiet! Any moment now Putnam might say something that would bring it all out, or Billings might——

But Hal had to go on talking about telegrams and letters. He talked louder than anyone until finally Putnam moved toward the dining room with Hal prancing after him, inviting him to have a drink in his own house. Raton wanted to follow. Didn't dare.

"Excuse us a moment, Bert," Putnam said.

She didn't like the sudden businesslike clip to his voice. He wasn't going to let Hal off. Something must be done at once. Mary Billings. She could help. She was the only one.

"Mary, can I speak to you alone for a moment?"

It really was splendid, the way she took her husband by the arm and led him into the *salon.* "Bert dear, wait for us, will you?"

"But what the devil!—what's going on?" Not easy to handle, Billings.

The door closed on him, and Mary came back. Tell her the truth, or nearly the truth.

"Putnam didn't know we were here, Mary. Hal meant to write him. He didn't mean when he sub-let

the house to you—Putnam wanted to rent his house, you see. And Hal—I never knew until to-night that he—I thought we could pay."

"Let me understand. Putnam didn't know you were in his house?"

"No, he didn't. Hal thought your husband would give him a job if we had a decent background. And then we could have paid. But now he—" The words were twisted and bitter. It wasn't so easy to explain. Through the dining-room door Hal's voice grew louder and louder, explaining.

"You poor dear!" Mary Billings' arms went around her. "I thought there was something wrong upstairs. But I couldn't understand——"

She didn't want to be pitied. Mustn't cry. "Hal really doesn't mean to—" Everything she said made it worse.

Mary Billings spoke quickly. "I'm afraid Bert will be very angry. I'll try and manage him and Mr. Putnam. Go up and pack what you can. I'll send your husband to you. I'm afraid you'll have to get him out quietly. Good-bye, Nita. I'm sorry."

She had lost her friend. Women like Mrs. Billings might pity, but they never could understand. Well, it couldn't be helped. Hurry up the stairs.

"Nita," Mary Billings called from below. "Bert lent your husband a little something yesterday. Keep it from me."

Oh dear, Hal had borrowed again. No time to think of it now. Where was the valise? In the

closet. Drag it out; pack what she could. Why didn't Hal come? Mary Billings' eyes—how sorry they had looked! And then she had turned away.

A cautious noise outside. Hal stepped into the room.

"Why did you mix the Billings woman up in this?" he said testily. "I could have fixed everything all right."

He couldn't have fixed anything. He had got the worst of it, she could see. The little veins were all swollen in his face. He paced the room cursing Putnam, cursing Raton.

Couldn't get much in the valise. Her suit, Hal's suit, handkerchiefs, a shirt. She couldn't find anything. She ran to and fro, fumbling in closets and drawers.

"Nita, old girl, I'm damn sorry. It's rotten for you." Hal put his big hands on her shoulders. She saw his face, flushed, his poor old sorry face. "I swear I meant to——"

Yes, he always meant to. There were tears in her eyes. One more look at the room, at the *chaise longue,* the little rosewood desk, the soft lace-covered bed. Never to sleep there any more——!

"Nita, I'm sorry. If that damn little Raton hadn't——"

"Hurry, Hal."

The Brassington-Welshes tiptoeing down the stairs, Hal carrying a shiny big valise. From the *salon* came voices, Mary Billings talking in a crisp

voice like a machine ticking. "You shall not, Bert. Mr. Putnam, you must listen to me. I promised her——"

The dining-room door opened. Raton pattered forward, Madame Raton behind.

Hal started back. "I'll wring his neck for him."

She got him by his coat, pulled him along. "Hal, for my sake!"

A noise sounded in the *salon* as of someone getting up, pushing a chair. The front door at last. She opened it. It shut heavily behind them.

It was cold. Hal stalked ahead, muttering, a shoulder sagging under the weight of the valise. She trotted along, trying to keep up the pace. The lights in the long, slim windows were like warm fires she was leaving. She looked back once.

Hal stopped to hail a taxi. Helped her in. "Grand Hotel," he said to the chauffeur.

"Hal, we can't afford——"

In the dusk of the cab she felt him settle beside her. He fumbled in his pocket and suddenly he began to chuckle. "Feel that."

It was his wallet bulging with bills. "Hal, what——?"

He took it away from her. "Ten thousand francs, old dear. Not bad—what?" Under the slanting rays of a street lamp, she saw him expanded, smiling. "You can call it my commission," he said. "Billings gave it to me yesterday. Meant to tell you. It's a month's rent, and I've earned it."

That was what Mary Billings had meant by a "little loan." Ten thousand francs! The price of a friend. Funny—*wasn't* it funny, stealing out in the night with ten thousand? She threw back her head and laughed. The laughter had little hooks on it. The little hooks caught in her throat, tore——

"Nita!" Hal gripped her arm.

But she had to go on laughing. Oh, dear—oh, dear—how funny! The beautiful black trunks left behind, and her sequin gown, and—yes, she had forgotten the toothbrushes. The Ratons' faces. Ten thousand francs for dressing Mary Billings up in a red velvet gown.

"Nita!"

It hurt to laugh like this. Lights flowed together, broke into loose dancing shapes. The taxi drew up in front of the hotel.

And her laughter left her.

CHAPTER IV

THE LOST VERONA

I

THEY couldn't stay on in Paris after that. Not that he minded in the least, Hal said, meeting Billings in any of the bars where so often they had had their jolly little times together. Billings ought to be grateful to him. Found him an old friend and a house in one throw. Oh, no, he wasn't afraid of Billings, or of Mr. Putnam for that matter.

But he felt he needed a rest and a change. England was the place. He wanted his England.

Well, he was having his England. Was it only a week ago that, breathing the foggy air of London, he declared he had rested long enough? He had certainly not rested in the manner of spending money. Ten thousand francs converted into pounds wasn't so much. Not when you went shopping and bought new luggage, new clothes.

She waited for him now in a small Italian restaurant in Soho. It was a nice little restaurant with its cheery background of English chintz, and it gave out inviting odors of spaghetti, sausage, mandarins. She was hungry.

She was also cynically reflecting that the day Hal had tired of his "rest" had been the day on which he met the slippery Greek with his greasy Latin manuscript. And the very next morning he had read in the *Daily Mail* of the arrival of Doctor Marshall, the distinguished American scholar, over here to receive from Oxford an LL.D. A manuscript and a Professor, said Hal, might add up a few pounds. It was a simple problem in arithmetic for a man of imagination.

She sat at a table next to a big mirror. Looking quite well to-day in her black velvet. But tired of waiting. Tired of London. Sick of red busses, leather shops, soft coal, and tall men in yellow gloves.

Whenever the dark, swift waiter glanced toward the empty chair opposite her, she remembered Italian ways, and her lips curled freshly. She knew how to keep a table at the crowded hour.

Hal would turn up presently, she rather suspected, in a very different mood from the sprightly one with which he had set forth from the Carlton that morning—top hat and patent leathers shiny, his new morning coat flowered with a white carnation. Very English, very sure of himself.

Trust him, he had said. The Professor was most awfully keen to get that manuscript for his University. Good joke on the old bird—what?—being taken in by a few photographed pages, and the prodigious legend that the original lay mouldering

in a vault of a mosque in Constantinople. See how it worked? Have to smuggle the thing out by bribing a mythical Turkish official. Hal, of course, was to manage this delicate and expensive operation.

Well, however incredibly guileless Doctor Marshall might be, it hadn't worked yet. And unless some money appeared from somewhere soon, Major and Mrs. Brassington-Welsh would have to leave the Carlton Hotel in a hurry.

She lit another cigarette—her third. Stupid, these noisy, pseudo-picturesque places—bits of foreign backyards transplanted to cater to nostalgia, curiosity and limited purses. She knew them too well: their jargon, their alien smells, their bleached local colour.

A slow sensation of someone staring. She glanced in the mirror against which her table stood. A waiter, lounging near, blocked her view. On either side of him, heads and shoulders were reflected in the gestures of eating—a woman's arm heavily bangled, a hand closed around a wine glass, a fat man, sucking in long dangling strands of spaghetti. In the foreground, her own face, unfamiliar, close—every little line and pore—green eyes enquiring under light brows. The powder was too thick around her nostrils. Rub it off with a finger tip. Her little finger evened the red on her lips. Yes, decidedly becoming, this black velvet——

The waiter moved on. And again she felt eyes fixed upon her. Wasn't it?—yes, it was the Greek,

Antonides, over there by the door talking to the Padrone. He saw that she saw him. His teeth flashed, and he came toward her, dark and shiny, carrying a flat parcel.

Unpleasant creature! Better be polite to him. She tilted her head; smiled. "Well, Mr. Antonides, what are you doing here?" Not so polite as all that.

"I saw your husband this morning, Mrs. Brassington-Welsh. He told me to bring him this." And softly he laid the parcel on the table.

She hated men who wore strange rings on tiny white hands. "What is it?"

The Greek smiled. "A manuscript." His round silky eyes watched her intently. "Your husband is getting it cheap—only forty pounds."

Forty pounds—over two hundred dollars! So Hal had gone and bought the thing! "I'm sure I don't know what he can do with it," she said, showing her annoyance.

Most objectionable, the way he shrugged his shoulders, leaning nearer to murmur—"Sell it, perhaps for a larger price. Isn't that possible, Mrs. Brassington-Welsh? You have many rich friends."

"We have no friends who would care for—shall I say an *old* manuscript?" She looked at him deliberately.

A waiter jostled by. But he only pressed closer to her table, spreading his hands fan-wise. "It can have any age you wish," he insinuated.

She touched the parcel beside her plate. "If you

care to leave this, Mr. Antonides, until my husband comes——"

He took her hint. "I shall be back later then. Major Brassington-Welsh has already paid me twenty pounds. He promised me the other twenty——"

"You can count on it," she promised coldly. Well, that settled the question of paying any hotel bill this week.

He bowed and his teeth showed again.

"Good-bye." Her smile was a habit not easily broken.

But he turned back as the people at the next table rose noisily to leave. "I have known your husband for a very long time," he murmured. "It is most interesting to me that he should be buying a Latin manuscript. I shall be happy to hear what he intends doing with it. *Au revoir, chère Madame.*"

Beastly man! Wasn't that like Hal to spend all that money! She opened the parcel. Well, if *that* was what he was paying forty pounds for, and expected to pass off on a poor old Professor as a valuable—what was the name of that Latin poet?—Cat—something—Catullus.

You only had to look at it. That wormy wooden binding, for instance, with new wood showing through in spots, where it had been less successfully smudged and greased over. You could make those worm holes with bird shot. The clasps broken; the edges chewed as if by mice; and the yellowed

parchment torn in places. Too obvious—too obvious! Beautifully done, though, all those blackish angular ciphers, and the cramped tight little notes in the margin. The red capitals were quite ornamental standing off by themselves in Indian file. Wonder what it said. You could see it was poetry the way the lines ran. But as to being worth forty pounds!

She looked up just in time. Hal's face seemed to balloon red and animated from the doorway, above the heads of drifting groups. One glance was enough. Something extraordinary had happened. Who was that behind him, that little figure drowned in a long overcoat? Good Heavens, Doctor Marshall! Quick, paper and string—whisk the manuscript back in its wrappings. Slide it down on the floor.

Hal saw her and came prancing across the room. The Professor followed.

"Hello—hello, Nita. Sorry to be late. I waited with the Professor for a cable. Then we had to go to the Bank." Hal's voice, round and hearty. "Sit down, sir—sit down. Waiter, another chair."

A cable! The Bank! Hal wagged his head at her.

"I'm dying of curiosity." She struck a girlish note, smiling up at Doctor Marshall, who stood blinking through his strong glasses.

"An eventful day—a very eventful day." His voice was like a vague little breeze stirring the

droopy fringe of his unexpectedly black moustache. All the rest of him was bald and white.

"Sit down, sir," Hal jovially repeated.

Major Brassington-Welsh in his element, ordering an expensive lunch. Her own talent lay in the familiar direction of entertaining a guest. What did one talk about to Professors?

Hal, sitting opposite her, settled that question He had taken on an atmosphere of mystery through which he shone like a red sun through a London fog. Leaning forward, he dropped his voice to what he considered a whisper. "Nita, we've found the lost Verona!"

Clever boy! That thing she was hiding between her chair and the wall? So that was what he meant to call it! Well, anything he found, someone would have to pay for. She turned to sparkle at the Professor.

"I should hardly care to make such a statement, Major," he corrected. "Mind you, I'm convinced that we have made a great discovery." For an instant his eyes seemed to burn through his glasses.

Hal nodded. He was in such a fluster of excitement that he couldn't keep his hands still. He drummed little tunes on the table.

"A discovery," Marshall continued, carefully picking his words, "that will startle the world of thought. Aside from the evidence of the photographs, the whereabouts of this manuscript leads to the most intriguing speculation. Think of it, Mrs.

Brassington-Welsh, think of it! After all these centuries, we find extant in Constantinople a Catullus——"

She thought of it. "I feel so ignorant, Professor." Her smile flashed out, appealingly. "Tell me what *is* the lost Verona?" Wouldn't do Hal any harm to hear.

The Professor dabbed at anchovy and Russian salad which the waiter was passing, while Hal poured Chianti, spilling it.

She sprinkled salt on the spotted tablecloth, listening with a forward movement of chin and shoulders. How fascinating! So in the tenth century there was a manuscript of Catullus, the earliest on record, which had mysteriously disappeared from Verona. It would take Hal to find a thing like that.

Marshall, wiping his glasses, warmed to his subject. "All the Catullus manuscripts we have to-day are descended from this lost Verona. You see, Mrs. Brassington-Welsh, printing was only invented in the fifteenth century. Before that, books had to be copied by hand. The monks who usually did this work were often illiterate and constantly made mistakes. I'm not boring you?"

Oh, no—no, indeed, he wasn't boring her. She thought of the Bank.

"So that from copy to copy the readings became almost unintelligible. It is my life's ambition, I may tell you, to re-establish out of all this confusion what Catullus really wrote. I can show you an

example of how even a letter alters the reading—" He dove in a cavernous pocket for a pencil.

"Do try these finocchi, Doctor. They're delicious." If she didn't stop him, he would go on forever.

He slid the pencil back in his pocket. "Thank you, no. Now, it has always been my theory," he continued, blowing through his moustache, "that at the fall of Constantinople the Turks cast as heathen literature a quantity of valuable uncatalogued manuscripts in the vaults of certain mosques. I wrote an article once on that subject which I shall be glad to send you. It seems nothing less than a miracle that your husband——"

Hal stroked the dark right wing of his moustache. "Pure luck, my dear Doctor," he modestly remarked. "I'd done the fellow a good turn. Remember our last visit to Constantinople, Nita?"

He needn't drag her in. "So long ago," she murmured.

Marshall turned to Hal. "Wasn't it last summer?"

"Best little woman in the world, my wife, but she has no idea of time." Hal slanted at her down his nose and hurried on. "The fellow couldn't do enough for us while we were there. I'd have bought the manuscript then if I could have afforded it. He insisted on my taking the photographs. Writes me now and then. Got a letter from him the other

day. He's ready to take big risks. In his official position——"

"I should think," the Professor interrupted with a dry note of humour, "that a Turkish gentleman so well aware of values would be willing to take a few risks for six thousand dollars."

Six thousand dollars! Her fork clicked against her plate. He had said six thousand dollars! She saw his bulging brow, his glasses shiny pools in which his eyes like little blue fish seemed to be swimming around and around.

"Six thousand dollars!" She heard her own voice struggling uphill. And she caught Hal's triumphant eye, the lid flickering in a wink.

"About fourteen hundred pounds," he chuckled. "Just shows what your word stands for there, Professor. Nita doesn't know. Tell her."

She stared at the bald white head, the droopy moustache that fluttered as he talked. She must be dreaming. He had—what?—cabled to an old graduate of his University, Herman Slade, for the money which had been promptly cabled back that morning. Hal was to send a special messenger with an advance payment of three thousand to Constantinople. The messenger was to bring back the manuscript on receipt of which Hal was to send the remaining three thousand to his mythical friend whose identity must be kept in the dark.

How Hal had ever managed! Why, he must have three thousand now! And the manuscript— She slid

her hand between the wall and her chair. Great Heavens, she had forgotten Antonides who was coming back here! In the excitement, Hal must have forgotten him, too. If he got wind of Marshall——

Their distinguished guest absently cutting slippery strands of spaghetti with his fork, seemed to have drifted into a scholar's paradise while Hal held forth. Great thing for the States! They'd have every blinking old—every illustrious man of learning in the world, trotting over there to look at that manuscript. A country could be proud of men like this Herman Slade who——

She fumbled in her bag. Tore out a leaf of her notebook.

"Mr. Slade has known me for a great many years," Marshall was saying a trifle complacently. "It was I, in fact, who persuaded him to donate our fine Library building. He often consults me about his remarkable collection."

Scribble a warning under cover of her napkin. Make Hal look at her. He was conveying a neat bundle of spaghetti to his mouth. She kicked his foot.

"What the devil?"

The Professor, who lacked Italian training, had become engrossed in the bewildering contents of his plate. She raised her pencil above the table edge, wig-wagged it. An old signal. Hal understood.

Keep Marshall talking. She had only to ques-

tion on a note of admiration—"You can really tell about a manuscript from photographs?"

He was happily launched. "Yes, indeed. We are forced to depend upon them, as the originals are scattered all over the world. In fact, sometimes I prefer them—for instance to detect the corrections of a later hand by the colour values of inks, or erasures by the almost imperceptible shadows of roughened surfaces. In my last book on Catullus," he proceeded chattily—"and by the way, I must send you a copy, Major—I gathered a large part of my data from photographs. Of course, there are always different opinions. I expect——"

Her smile held him as she slipped the small piece of paper under the bread basket. Hal reached out for a piece of bread. It was neatly done.

From under the large velvet brim of her hat, she shone upon the Professor, light brows lifted, lips parted. Questioning—listening. He expected then that this manuscript would raise a storm of controversy? A life work to defend it? How splendid of him!

Cotelettes à la Milanaise and salad. She coaxed sweetly, "You haven't eaten a thing, Professor."

How could he eat when he talked so much!

Hal pretended to drop his napkin. Dove under the table. He had read her note and wanted to see what she had done with his precious manuscript. He emerged apoplectic. Twisted himself in a position where he could watch the door.

"When your husband asked for my opinion on the photographs, I confess I was skeptical." Doctor Marshall's wispy voice went on and on. "You see, of the hundred odd Catullus manuscripts in existence, there are only four or five of major importance. You see—" and he beamed upon Hal, "I believe them to be all copies of *our* manuscript."

Sort of an Adam among manuscripts, this lost Verona. She glanced toward the door.

"The Bodleian Library would never forgive me, Major," Marshall readjusted his glasses, "if they knew that you had contemplated, as an old Oxford man, presenting them with such a gift. Of course, they already own one of the finest copies—the one we call *O*. The Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris has *G;* the Vatican Library *R;* and Saint Marks in Venice——"

Hal was growing restless. "Only too glad to oblige you, Doctor."

Fruit and cheese at last. She picked out a mandarin. Antonides wouldn't turn up at this hour.

The Professor fidgeted as if he had something on his mind. "You expect to get your messenger off this afternoon? You have someone in view, of course?"

"Oh, yes—yes, indeed," Hal hastily assured him.

One of those pauses that mean trouble. Then—"Would you have any objection to my interviewing him?" came from Marshall. "I am naturally anxious——"

He wasn't the only one. What could Hal say? She dared not look at him.

"Very natural, indeed, my dear sir." The genial tone of a Doctor addressing a nervous patient. "Certainly, you can see him if you wish. But——"

He must have some plan. From the corner of her eye she saw him—a florid gentleman of military bearing, leaning impressively forward. "But I think it would be a mistake. Have a cigar, Doctor." He offered his new case with the silver crest. There was something about an expensive cigar——

"Tell you why." Hal, very cool, paused to strike a match. "I give my man his orders and the sealed envelope we fixed up at the Bank. He brings me back a sealed package. All there is to it. But you, coming in on it, rouse his curiosity. Understand? He'd be likely to talk when he gets there. And if my friend—charming fellow, but well—you can't trust a Turk." Hal moved his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other. "If he hears that an American is at the other end of this—this little transaction, I'm afraid he'll hold us up for more. However, suit yourself, Professor—suit yourself." And Hal, as if he didn't care one way or another, flecked an ash on to the floor.

"Dear me, I hadn't thought of that." Marshall looked worried. "I'm rather inexperienced in such matters. Perhaps you're right, Major."

"Pos-i-tively right." Hal grew rather boisterous. "You've got my receipt. You leave it to me. You

shall have your manuscript in ten—say twelve days. Count five to get there. He goes by Paris, Milan, Venice, Trieste, Belgrade, Sofia— Looked it all up. Two days for the business. Five to get back."

The Professor sighed. "It's a long time to wait. The responsibility——

With a little start, she turned her head. Antonides stood in the doorway, staring at their table. How long had he been there?

"Hal!" She spoke softly.

He gave one look. Jumped up. "Excuse me a moment." Hands in his pockets, he swaggered across the floor.

Watch them in the mirror. Couldn't tell a thing from Antonides' face. Hal straddled in front of him, talking.

"A friend of your husband's?" Of course Marshall could see, too, in the mirror.

"I don't know." Change the subject. "How do you like London, Doctor?"

He did sound worried. "I shall be glad to get home. I dread these twelve days. I had meant to sail—of course, your husband may be right. I——"

"Trust Hal," she said quickly, lighting another cigarette. And again she glanced toward the door. Once he had his forty pounds, Antonides couldn't do anything. Couldn't he? She sipped her coffee. Must keep up the conversation. Those smooth dark eyes were watching Marshall.

"You speak Greek and Latin, don't you?" The girlish note was most successful.

Those blue eyes could twinkle. "Not fluently. You see, we don't get much practice."

She glanced once more in the mirror. Hal was handing over something. Well, with three thousand in his pocket, he could afford a hundred. Thank goodness, at last Antonides was going.

Hal marched back, flushed and smiling. "Who d'you think that was, Professor?"

Too sure of himself. She didn't like that roguish gleam in his eye.

"Our messenger!" he brought out triumphantly. "Didn't tell you, but I telephoned him while you were at the Bank. He'll be in Paris to-night."

Oh, why did he have to go and do things like that! There he sat, delighted with himself. Great idea, using Antonides——

Marshall fluttered with excitement. So that was the man! Glad to have seen him. Next to talking to him, that had been the most reassuring— No time wasted then——

No time wasted, certainly, in complicating the situation. The Greek in London, Marshall in London—always the chance of their meeting!

Hal was paying the bill. The waiter smiled, the Padrone smiled, as well they might.

She reached down, picked up the parcel at which Hal glared as if it held dynamite. Tease him a bit. "Would you like to carry my bundle like a good

husband?" And she held it right under the Professor's nose.

"Give it to me." Hal grabbed for it.

She laughed. "I'll carry it, myself, thank you." She tucked it under her arm. Trotted toward the door.

Marshall never even glanced at it as he took his leave in the chilly grey street.

From the taxi window she saw him, an odd little figure in his long coat and wide-brimmed, squarish derby, trudging through the mist, crossing Shaftesbury Avenue. A red bus almost knocked him down.

"Hal, what did Antonides say?"

"Not much." Hal was busy drawing forth a sealed envelope. Broke the seal. "Wanted to know who the old bird was." Bills in his hand—bills that were crisp and new. "How's that for a day's work? Seven hundred pounds!" He thrust them towards her, gleeful as a boy.

"Did you tell him who it was?"

"Not much." Hal chuckled. "Said he was a friend of your family. Cheero, Nita, why the glum face?" He swept the bills into his wallet; thumped her on the knee.

You couldn't be angry with him for long. She glanced out of the window. Bond Street. Crowds moving heavy and dark in the grey. Tea shops, tobacco shops—shop windows flattened in the mist, their wares but dimly seen as the taxi sped along. Things to buy. Money to pay with.

"What on earth possessed you to tell Marshall that Antonides was your messenger?"

"Well, perhaps I did over-do it a bit," Hal admitted. "Thought the old gentleman needed something of the kind. We can always skip if anything goes wrong. Seven hundred pounds isn't so bad!"

Yes, skipping was their usual pace.

"Now Nita, you're not going to——"

No, she wasn't going to worry. After all, could anything be funnier than a famous scholar vouching for a manuscript that Hal had bought for forty pounds from a disreputable Greek? A joke on all those stuffy old fogies who thought themselves so wise!

She brightened to laughter. Not for long.

"Oh, Hal, if it ever gets out!"

2

It did get out.

"The Devil!" Hal cried one morning, staring at his *Daily Mail*. "There it is!"

There it was, or a reporter's garbled version of it—a beautiful story of how Herman Slade, well-known Patron of Letters, was paying a fabulous price for a mysterious old manuscript which Professor Marshall, the distinguished Latinist now in London, had unearthed in Constantinople. Mr. Slade refused to say where the manuscript was at present. No mention, as yet, of Major Brassington-

Welsh. But Marshall's photograph was on the back page. The old idiot must have written Slade when first he saw the photographs. And Slade, later receiving the cable, had talked.

According to Hal's schedule, only seven days more to go before the wretched manuscript could be delivered to Marshall and the final three thousand dollars handed over. Now this—publicity! The one thing——!

Suddenly, Hal began to laugh. Sprawling back in the one comfortable chair, his beige dressing gown folded around him, his red-slippered feet in the air, he opened his mouth, closed his eyes, heaving and wallowing in merriment. The breakfast tray on the table beside him rattled. His paper slid to the floor. Against the light background of that polite bedroom, he showed up violently coloured.

She stood staring down at him. Glad he thought it so funny. Her own sense of humour was not in working order. At this hour of the morning she always felt puffy of eye, droopy of lip, and like turning her back on windows. She clutched her kimono with one hand; with the other, she shook him.

"Ho—ho," he roared on a subsiding wave. "Can you see the old duffer's face when he reads this?"

No, but she could see them skipping, and she told him so. "Limelight isn't becoming to you, Hal."

He sat up, his hair rumpled. Whistled. He

hadn't thought of that. "Oh, I say, old girl, we can't get out now."

That was precisely what they were going to do and quickly. Why take risks when they had, already, seven hundred pounds! "D' you want a swarm of reporters enquiring into your private affairs?" She let this sink in while she hunted for the key of the trunk.

He rose, tying the cord of his dressing gown. He was growing fat. "Marshall won't talk." But he didn't sound convinced. He prowled to the window where he stood staring at the wintry, lemonish light of another London day. "Suppose I telephone and explain?"

"The less explaining you do, the better." She was in the closet, unhooking hangers. These wardrobe trunks were convenient. After all, three thousand dollars—or what Hal hadn't spent of it, would carry them quite a way.

He'd have to leave behind all those seedy old books he had bought—books on Catullus, a fat blue volume of Marshall's, autographed, a Latin dictionary—a pompous row of them on the mantlepiece.

"You'd better dress and go get tickets for somewhere." She may have sounded a little tired. It was hard luck!

"Damn it all!" he growled, rubbing the blue unshaven part of his chin. But obediently he strode

into the bathroom from which, presently, came the intimate racket of splashing and swearing.

She sighed. They were comfortable here. Well, it might be worse. Nice—Monte Carlo— She lit a cigarette, trotting back and forth. She took up the blue evening dress Hal had insisted on buying her. She had never liked it.

"I say, Nita, where shall we go?" Hal, in his shirt sleeves, suspenders dangling, peered from the bathroom door, a razor brandished in mid-air. His face was a soapy mask from out which gleamed a bloodshot eye.

"Oh, anywhere." She brushed back strands of hair. She needed another wave.

The old weary sense that there was no other way out; packing—travelling—boats, trains—new fields—fields that had grown again over the paths they had trodden.

Pull out the bureau drawers. There now, cigarette ashes over everything. Hal's passion for handkerchiefs and neckties was only equalled by the empty whiskey bottles of which he left a trail wherever they went.

"You've made a holy mess of the place." Hal again, peevish, poor dear, fumbling among piles of stuff on the bed.

"Leave those alone." With his great, big clumsy hands, he was upsetting everything.

"Hang it all, Nita, I want a necktie."

"Well, there's one on the chair."

Drag out the black valise. She knelt before it. What a jumble! Two empty bottles of Haig and Haig. Simply have to leave them in the closet. One bottle half full; orange-wood sticks; a pencil, point broken; an unwrapped piece of soap; that shoehorn she had been looking for everywhere; some loose French francs jingling about. Under rumpled packing paper, the manuscript. Hal must have spilt some whiskey on it. She held it, scrambling to her feet. Of all smudged, stained, forlorn bits of rubbish——!

Hal, his face askew, his elbows crooked as he squeezed into one of his tight collars, turned to glare at it. "What are you going to do with the thing?"

"Send it to your Professor." Had to give him something for his three thousand! Then laughter came up in her as it had come to Hal.

"Oh, dear—oh, dear!" she gasped. Hal regarded her sourly.

The telephone bell joined in her last peal, cutting it short. Should they answer?

"Must be Marshall." Before she could stop him, Hal took up the receiver. She stood at his shoulder, strained, listening.

"Who?—Mr.—Who?—Antonides waiting downstairs? Be down in a moment."

Antonides! What did he want! "Oh, Hal, why do you see him?"

"Have to," he answered shortly, jerking into his coat. "He said he'd wait if I wasn't ready." Pre-

tended to hunt for a handkerchief. Too busy to look at her.

She followed him to the door. "Hal, be careful what you say. I don't trust that man."

He stood dapper in his blue suit. How grey his hair had turned along the edges! "Don't you worry, old dear." He bent to kiss her, and was gone.

Empty, empty room with its elegance muddled by human things—bedclothes tossed, crumbs and ashes on the breakfast tray, trunk and valise yawning. Things—things on the little desk, on the bureau, on chairs; the reek of cigarettes; water dripping in the bathroom, and towels flung about.

She should have gone down with Hal.

There was still time. She thrust the manuscript back into the bag. Finish packing later. She put on energy with her stockings and powder; courage with the red wings that helped her lips to smile. Now her black gabardine with the leather trimmings, the leather-edged box coat. Better wear a hat and veil.

Trouble. She knew it as she hastened across the spacious lounge to where Hal and his visitor were sitting in a corner among palms and wicker furniture. At this hour the place was almost deserted. She passed an old man reading a paper; an American consulting a Baedeker; a bored couple sitting bolt upright, waiting for someone.

The two men rose, Antonides suave, Hal savage. The veins about his temples swollen purplish and

throbbing. "I say, Nita!" He kept his voice down, trying for control. "Here's a rum joke on us." A joke he didn't relish from his manner. "Our friend has an idea that I've made a fortune out of his damned manuscript. Perfect rot, of course."

She had feared something like this. She sat down facing the Greek. "You've read that absurd story in the *Daily Mail?*" Under her veil, her lips curled in obedient amusement.

Antonides waved his tiny hand with the horrid scarab ring. "It is the truth—is it not?" He spoke softly.

Better not deny too much. She met those smooth dark eyes with the deepening green of her own. "A very exaggerated story, Mr. Antonides. But even suppose—" She leaned forward. "Suppose my husband did sell the manuscript for a little more than he paid for it. You got your price, didn't you?"

"My price—*then.*" Smiling, he drew out a gold cigarette case. His small hand, soft as a woman's, held it out to her. Brown cigarettes, gold tipped.

Rather take poison.

Hal scowled, his fist heavy on the table. "You have no business——"

The Greek turned slowly, still smiling. "No?—But then neither have you, Major. You are very clever. Let us be frank. The manuscript *may* have come from Constantinople. I think I gave you that idea. It is worth something as an idea. This Doc-

tor Marshall would be interested, would he not, to know where you got the story—and the manuscript?"

"Well!" Her voice hardened.

"D'you know what that fellow has had the infernal impudence to demand?" Hal burst out. "Eight hundred pounds! I told him I didn't have it."

"But you can get it—not so?"

Her eyes warned Hal, whose voice had risen. The old man peered over his paper in their direction. The American strolled past them, staring.

Her foot tapped the floor. "Look here," she said as quietly as she could. "We haven't any such sum. You have nothing—nothing," she repeated, "to gain from us."

The Greek rose with one of his supple movements. He stood stroking the silky wisp of his moustache as he gazed down at Hal. "Eight hundred, Major. I do not know what arrangements you have made with Doctor Marshall and his rich, his generous friend, but let me advise you——"

Hal glowered, red of eye. "You and your advice be damned!"

"Hal!" It didn't help any to curse the creature.

"Madame is more reasonable." He turned toward her. "Let me then advise you not to leave London—although the weather is bad at this season—until you make me that little compensation. You would not get far." His voice grew sharper. "It

would be disagreeable, not so, to be forced to return from Dieppe or Calais. You see, my friends," his small white hand fluttered in a deprecating gesture, "I have nothing to lose this time. And I should feel it my duty to inform Doctor Marshall that I sold to the Major a manuscript for what it may be worth—forty pounds."

"You think you can stop us from leaving London?" She was on her feet, facing him.

His eyes were expressionless, as if painted on glass. "I regret— You cannot go without my knowing. I have friends in the hotel. And I shall also be watching—and waiting." He bowed and turned away, threading among tables and chairs to sit down in an opposite corner.

Hal lit a cigarette, puffed, flung it down and ground his heel on it. "If that little rat thinks he can frighten me——!"

But he knew and she knew that the Greek had meant what he said. "Oh, Hal, don't be a fool. He's got us. We'll have to stay and see it through." She rose wearily. Hal stood up beside her, tugging at his moustache. "I'd like to ring the fellow's blinkin' neck."

As they crossed the lounge, Antonides prepared to follow.

"Telephone, sir." A boy met Hal in the lobby.

It was surely Marshall this time. "Remember, Hal. Hold on to yourself. I'll wait in our room."

She waited, restlessly pacing to and fro. If Marshall held his tongue, they might still——

Hal's heavy hand opened the door.

"We're in for it," he groaned. "Marshall's all up in the air. Swears he saw my messenger on the street, yesterday— Confound Antonides! What with that and the story getting out, the old boy's distracted."

"Will he talk?"

"Talk!" Hal mopped his brow. "Wish you could have heard him jabberin' over the wire. I'm off to see him now. Do the best I can." He tramped to the window, wheeled around. "I say, old thing, shall we try and give Antonides the slip?"

Not a chance in the world. "Better not. We'll manage somehow." She tried to sound cheerful.

He grunted, took up his hat. She kissed him and let him go.

Nothing for it but to put her things away again. Dresses and suits hanging in the closet once more. Take this opportunity to look over Hal's socks.

She sat down to her darning. In and out—out and in—the needle creeping. How ever had he worn through these new socks so soon! Oh dear, think of being anchored to the Carlton Hotel by a beastly Latin manuscript. Antonides wouldn't hesitate—he wouldn't——

Where was her sense of humour?—as lost as the lost Verona, and not so easily found——

3

Hal said he had settled everything and not to worry. All they had to do, he said, was to hold down Marshall, avoid publicity and between now and the delivery of the manuscript lose Antonides. A simple little programme.

To begin with, he had only half convinced Marshall that he couldn't have seen in London a man who must now be on his way back from Constantinople. They could get in the police, Hal had gone so far as to propose. Of course, an investigation would involve them in a most unpleasant matter of smuggling and bribery. However, if the Professor wished——

The Professor, as Hal had expected, did not wish. He fell into a panic at the mere idea of compromising himself further. He cabled Slade not to give out any more information, and shut himself up with the photographs, in a study which had been lent to him in Dean's Court. Morning and afternoon, he telephoned to ask if there were any news.

Meanwhile, Antonides refused to be lost. One felt him everywhere in the smoky baffling pattern of London—dodging behind the lions of Trafalgar Square; blending in with the yellowish fog that webbed streets and gardens; padding along the embankment to the haunting sounds of the river. One felt him in the ordered spaces of the Carlton, dis-

sembled behind drifting groups, screened by tables and plants.

There was always a chance that Marshall might catch another glimpse of him, for on the two occasions when Hal went to Dean's Court, Antonides followed to linger in the shadow of the neighbouring Abbey.

Hal returned from the second visit to report that he had found Marshall in a fearful state—beginning to doubt his own judgment; wondering if he hadn't made a mistake.

"Damn it all," Hal flung himself at the valise, rattling papers and bottles. "The old boy looks as if he hadn't slept or eaten for a week. He just sits there poring over those photographs until he can't make any sense out of them. I couldn't myself, in his place."

Came the tinkle of bottle against glass.

She turned in her seat at the desk where she sat writing to her mother—all about the latest plays and the lovely things Hal had bought for her in London.

"Something's got to be done," Hal fretted. "Why, Nita, if I'd really found his blinkin' old lost Verona, he wouldn't believe it." He sat down his glass with an injured air.

Well, she couldn't help it. She went back to her letter. "Hal and I haven't done much sightseeing. The weather has been so——"

Thump-bang-creak. Hal marching to and fro,

tugging at his moustache—muttering—taking up a book, opening and slamming it shut.

"Hal, dear," mildly, "I can't write if you——"

Silence. He had settled down with a book. The scratch of a match. Cigar smoke hung in the air.

She wrote—"Hal joins me in love. Affectionately—" There, that was done. He had left his bottle on the mantlepiece. Must put it away; rinse the glass.

"By Jove!" He sprang from his chair. "I've got it, Nita!"

"Got what?" She watched him anxiously from the bathroom door. Oh, dear, he was having another inspiration!

He wouldn't tell her what it was. And presently, he bustled out, his book under his arm.

Came two beastly days of Marshall, querulous on the telephone; of Antonides, sleek, smiling, dogging their footsteps.

At night, the manuscript seemed to rise from its hiding place and come to sit like a monstrous weight on her chest. Nightmares in Latin. The darkness wriggled and swarmed with angular ciphers tumbling like elfish acrobats through her dreams. The ghost of Catullus haunted her from the domes of gigantic mosques.

Then one morning Hal came bounding back about lunch time, exultantly brandishing something that looked as if he might have fished it out of a scrap basket. "This will fix the old boy, Nita."

She felt cross. Here she had been waiting, dressed and idle for over two hours. "What on earth is it, Hal? A letter?"

"Clever girl!" He straddled in front of her, his head cocked on one side.

She took the thing, a sheet of parchment folded. More Latin! "Where did you get it?"

"I made it."

"You made it! Oh, Hal!"

"Well, I didn't exactly make it," he admitted impatiently. "I got the idea from a letter in one of my books. Remember the book I was reading the other day? A chap I happen to know—used to be at Oxford. Fact is, he was sent down the same time I was—worked it out for me. Doesn't it look like the real thing, though?"

It looked, she thought, like more trouble. "What are you going to do with it?"

Well, he was going to pretend that the Turkish gentleman had sent it on by mail. It was supposed to have been found folded in with the manuscript.

She set it down on the table. "I don't see the use——"

"Look here, Nita." He followed her to the window. "You don't understand. It simply proves the manuscript to be genuine. Suppose a fellow in Florence, Patron of Letters like this Slade, wanted a copy of Catullus——"

Catullus—Catullus—she was sick of the sound of Catullus.

Hal trailed her back to the table. "He'd have to borrow a manuscript to have it copied, wouldn't he?"

She supposed he would. She would even grant that the Verona people might have entrusted their precious Catullus to a messenger who never reached his destination, losing himself and the manuscript somewhere *en route*. But——

"If you'll only listen, Nita." Hal grabbed up his masterpiece, glowing again with pride. "Here, I'll read the address in Latin so that you can hear how it sounds. And I'll translate the rest. Now the address goes like this—'Ad Reverendum Patrem Bibliothecæ Veronensis Præfectum'——"

Quite clever of him, really, to read Latin. Didn't doubt his cleverness as much as she feared it.

He gave a pompous imitation of Marshall—"Now listen carefully, Nita, and you'll see the point. I'm translating—understand? Now—! After the address, I begin— 'I am returning to you by a special trusty messenger the Catullus which you kindly allowed me to have in order that I might get a copy made for Coluccio, the Chancellor of Florence. Although my messenger will not have to pass through the disturbed regions of the city, I have, nevertheless, ordered him to go thoroughly armed' — Then I put the signature. I looked it all up— 'Casparus de Broaspinis—A.D. 11 kal. December 1374'—Great stuff, that. Convince anybody."

Convincing enough, if you wanted to be convinced. But something warned her——

"I think it's wonderful, Hal. I don't see, though —in two days now you can give him the manuscript. What's the use of this?"

That set him off. The use of it? Well, if she'd seen Marshall, she'd know. This explained everything: how the manuscript had left Verona, and how the messenger had probably got into a fight—hadn't she noticed that part about his going armed? He'd read a letter almost like it in his book. Only changed the names and dates. Here was a document proving that the manuscript must have been stolen by people who didn't know its value. Probably they passed it on to others, and so on, until, somehow, it reached Constantinople. Clear as day. "And Marshall's getting it for nothing," Hal ended in a sulky tone.

She had spoiled his planned effect, impaired his confidence. She put a hand on his arm. His face was all puckered and red with disappointment. "Hal, dear, let's wait, shall we? You can always use it at the last moment if you have to."

"When I've gone to all the trouble—" he muttered. "I tell you, the old boy needs bucking up. Look at it, why don't you? I challenge any expert. Why, I'd be taken in, myself."

She didn't want to look at it. "Hal, will you do me a favour?" She clung to him, coaxing. "Let me keep it for you. If you really need it later——"

"No!" he snapped, stubborn and frowning.

She loosened her hold and turned away. Walked

a few steps, head and shoulders drooping. He was watching her. "Why do you worry me so?" She asked it of him wearily, trailing across the room to the window where she stood staring out at the muggy sky.

"Damn it all!" His voice sounded jerky and muffled. "Have your own way then. I think it's bally rot. But I don't want you fussing and fretting. I say, Nita—don't."

She was waiting for that, and flew to him, standing on tiptoe to give him a hug. "Dear old thing." His bristly cheek scratched against hers.

He watched her moodily while she tucked his convincing letter in her handbag.

"Well, I won't answer for anything now," said he in the tone of one who has done his best. "We'll be in a pretty pickle, though, if Marshall balks at the last moment, and Antonides holds out for his money."

She tried for brightness. "Antonides wouldn't hold us in that case. Wait two more days anyway."

"Marshall hasn't telephoned, has he?" Hal pretended to be absorbed in his nails. Wandered over to the bureau.

Why, so he hadn't. Bad sign.

Neither that evening nor the next morning did any word come. Something had to be done. That was evident. And Hal was too nervous to do it. He didn't say anything, but she knew what he was thinking. If, on the high wave of confidence, he had taken

the letter to Marshall, the situation might be very different now.

And to-morrow was the day—the twelfth day.

She waited until after lunch. Hal, silent, irritable, lay heavily on the bed. She covered him with a comforter. A nap would do him good.

Quick now, her hat, the large black velvet one. White gloves. She gave a last look in the mirror. Tiptoed over to the bed. "I'm going out do an errand, dear. I'll be back soon."

He grunted, flopping over on his side. It wasn't like him to give in like this. She touched him lightly on the forehead. Stole away.

4

An anxious little woman in black velvet, trotting along Whitehall. London seemed huger that afternoon, caught in the tarnished stuff of a mist almost palpable, through which people drained of colour appeared to move more slowly—a brick-faced Tommy and his cockney sweetheart, a one-legged man selling postcards with the white badge of ex-service on his cap, an athletic young girl in a felt hat and muffler, a middle-aged man who looked as if he had been baked in his clothes.

Big Ben struck full and rich. One-two-three. She thought of the bells of Florence, the bells of Paris. Wished now she had told Hal where she was going. Antonides, stationed in the hotel lobby, had bowed

as she passed. His smile linked him with shady business; linked him with Hal. She shivered, glanced behind her. No, he hadn't followed. She stopped to ask her way. These English bobbies were handsome creatures.

Nearly there now. The bulk of the Abbey rose grim in the fog. Dean's Court must lie behind. She felt shy coming upon it.

Pinched trees on a wintry patch of ground. Stone under foot, stone hemming her in. No place, this, for Nita Brassington-Welsh. Hushed and bleak in the mist, a solemn row of houses eyed her austerely. If she didn't hurry, she would turn back.

That narrow-shouldered one must be the house. An effort now to mount the steps. Smile at the porter. Up narrow stairs, wanly lit. Offices—a musty smell of papers.

The top floor and a door. She knocked. No answer, but you could hear the faint sound of papers rustling. She opened the door.

"Mrs. Brassington-Welsh! How very kind! You must excuse me, I haven't been feeling well." The Professor bobbed up, startled, from a big littered desk. In the focussed rays of a low hanging, green shaded lamp, his moustache looked like a dripping blot of ink. He wore over his eyes a green thing that resembled the visor of a jockey's cap. He pushed it higher on his bulging white forehead, as, hurriedly, he advanced.

"Why, Doctor Marshall!" Her prepared brightness was lost in the small stuffy room. No wonder the man was half dead, mooning in here. "We were worried about you." She stood, not knowing quite what to do while he groped for a chair. It smelt of old books and stale tobacco. Someone ought to take care of him. It was really a shame——

"I don't suppose you have any news?" His eyes, behind their glasses, blinked watery, red-rimmed.

Poor worried old thing! She thought of the letter in her handbag. Hesitated.

"I can't really make out these photographs. You see, the readings are so different from any other of the manuscripts, and so near what I have always believed the lost Verona—" He moved around to his desk, nervously shifting papers. "But they are so different— I'm afraid too different. I don't know any more—I don't know." His voice sounded wispier than ever in this room of dusty books and papers.

Perhaps Hal was right after all. Her fingers moved at the catch of her bag.

"You see these?" He grubbed about in the litter, pushed a sheaf of cables toward her. "From my colleagues— Most upsetting to be congratulated before—I don't know—I don't really know. I told your husband I was almost sure I saw the man—the messenger. Since then, I haven't had a moment's peace."

Should she? She drew out the parchment letter. She leaned forward impulsively. "Hal told me to give you this, Doctor Marshall." No going back now. "He got it by mail this morning from Constantinople. It's a letter found with the manuscript. He thought——"

Marshall was up from his desk, standing beside her. His hand trembled as he took the thing.

She sank back in the shabby leather chair. Stared at a half empty glass of milk on the edge of the desk—horrid stuff. Had she done right—had she?

How still he was! He must have read it through by now.

He had turned and was groping for the window. She saw him, a dingy little figure in loose fitting black, outlined against the sickly light. She wasn't afraid. But strangely her heart stirred, seemed to pull her toward him.

"Doctor Marshall."

He didn't answer.

"Doctor Marshall." The room closed in, stifling. She rose quickly, crossed over. Touched his arm.

He didn't look at her. "This letter isn't genuine." He spoke in a queer tired voice, staring out at the looming grey towers of the Abbey.

"Not genuine? But Doctor Marshall—" No, she couldn't pretend. Her throat went dry and tight.

"The date is wrong. Coluccio wasn't—" The

thin voice broke off. His gesture was hopeless. "It's a flagrant, clumsy forgery. You say your husband got this from Constantinople?"

She could only nod, plucking at her bag.

"My child, this is a great blow to me—a great blow." He walked unsteadily to his desk, bent over the photographs. "I've made a mistake," he said. "The letter wouldn't have been necessary if—" An old man, broken and weary, he sank into his chair, covered his face with his hands.

She stood wavering beside him, caught with this old man in the hoary dust of some tragedy beyond her. All for a manuscript—just a manuscript. She hadn't understood; hadn't realised.

If he had only turned on Hal as others had turned before! How little and mean she felt! She and Hal—what were they but mean adventurers?—taking advantage of a credulous old man. No word of comfort to give him. She slid on to her knees, took his poor cold fingers in hers. "I'm sorry!"

"Don't worry, my dear—don't worry." He tried to pat her hand. "It isn't your fault. I should have known."

Words were hot within, beating, pressing to be out. No, she couldn't give Hal away. "I'm sorry."

But he had forgotten her. She heard him like a far away little wind sighing— "A laughing-stock—never get back after this—my whole life——"

It did mean his life. She saw that now. He had

staked his professional reputation— And she had thought it a joke!

What was that! Voices in the hall. Hal's voice raised, arguing.

The Professor didn't move. She stumbled to her feet.

Someone pounded on the door. Hal burst in, brandishing a flat parcel. Behind him, before he could bang the door to, slipped the Greek.

"Hello—hello. Didn't know you were here, Nita. Professor—" Hal plunged through the stillness as through a paper hoop. "I've got something here you'll be glad to see. My messenger arrived a day earlier—" And he turned to glare at Antonides.

That's what came of leaving him alone. He hadn't been able to wait. He wasn't going to wait now. He snapped the string of his parcel in a way that meant business.

"Listen to me." Her voice whipped out.

The Professor tried to rise, sank limply back in his chair. "The manuscript is worth nothing." She stood very still, facing them.

"What!" Hal was in no mood for shocks.

She could deal with him. Between them there was always that awareness, as of a language known only to themselves. But Antonides!

She lifted her head. She felt the Greek dark and foreign, uneasy. Her eyes met those smooth shiny ones. He had moved, edging nearer to the door.

"Hal, we can't let the Professor suffer. He—we've made a mistake. You'll pay back that money, won't you? You'll want to do that." It was all she could think of. The very least they could do.

"I couldn't allow," came faintly from Marshall.

Ah, but Hal would pay it back. He didn't understand yet. When he did——

Antonides understood, though. His hand was on the knob of the door.

He had nothing to gain, and he knew it. "Mr. Antonides, you'd better go. You see——"

He saw. The door opened, shut softly.

"I say—but, Nita—" Hal wasn't to give up so easily. The moment Antonides left, he thought—poor old Hal—that she had played for just this. She had helped so often before.

And now with the Greek gone, and his assurance recovered, he pranced forward.

"Hal, the letter——"

But with one of his handsome gestures, he had unwrapped the manuscript, thrust it into Marshall's hand. "Take my word for it, Doctor——"

"Oh, don't!" she cried. "Oh, don't."

The old man under the green shaded lamp mechanically fingered the pages.

With a sob, she took Hal's arm. "My dear, don't you understand yet?" She drew him into the shadows by the window.

"I gave him the letter," she whispered. "He knew right away."

Hal whistled. Then was curiously still, staring out at the gaunt black trees, the masses of stone.

Suddenly she felt him close. "Nita, old girl, don't you worry. We'll manage——"

"Hal, dear, it isn't that. It doesn't matter about us."

A shrill cry whirled them around. Marshall, deathly white, stood wavering under the light, a hand flattened on the manuscript, the other gripping the edge of the table.

Oh, he mustn't break down. She started for him.

But now she saw him more clearly, transfigured. He was pointing down at the page. What was he saying?

"Catullus — Catullus — the most extraordinary——"

Then Hal's voice, booming, filled the room. Hal's hand, swung high, the big heavy palm descending on the straightened old shoulders.

"Knew it all along, sir— There you are! If ever you need to find any more manuscripts, you come to me. It's the biggest——"

And Marshall's voice, tremulous, "You had faith, Major. I didn't see how I could have made a mistake. But I——"

Faith! An odd kind of faith when even now she could hardly believe— So it was real! They hadn't thought of that. They had thought of everything else.

Marshall's voice went on and on. She didn't need to listen.

She wanted to feel proud. For once, she and Hal——

The Professor smiled at her.

A great tenderness, a warmth filled her and made all things seem right. She went to him and took his hand in both of hers.

"Oh, I'm so glad—if you knew how glad!" And she looked up into his face.

CHAPTER V

BRASSINGTON HALL

I

THE time had come, Hal said, to settle down. He had had enough of this roving about, living a homeless dog's life. Hang it all, a man owed something to society. He admitted he owed a lot. But They, whoever they were, couldn't down him any longer. In contributing that valuable old manuscript to the world of letters, he had demonstrated his sense and judgment.

All he asked of Dr. Marshall was not to give the papers the story of Constantinople because of possible complications for his friend the Turkish official. To this, Marshall reluctantly consented.

Hal's performance for inevitable interviewers was the finished product of a resourceful imagination. His picture appeared in several sheets as that of a travelled gentleman of leisure through whom the distinguished scholar had obtained a rare prize. Also his own version of the past. Never mind who did or didn't believe it. He was about to show her, Nita, what, given the chance and a bit of money to start on, he could do. An idea had long been germi-

nating in his fertile brain, awaiting its opportunity.

There was one thing about Hal. When he had an idea, he carried it through no matter where it led him—or her. This particular idea, when first he confided it to her, appeared in the blazing light of wildest fancy. He could never, never manage it. To get back Brassington Hall and turn the grounds into the paying proposition of an exclusive golf course! Never. Couldn't be done.

Yet it was done. Major Brassington-Welsh in honourable action was a stupendous sight—a sight she had given up hope of ever seeing. He made her ashamed of her lack of faith.

He had overcome every obstacle, overweighed every objection, every argument. Had leased Brassington Hall for ten years, paid the first year's term, and transformed field and pasture into an ideal golf course. To accomplish this, he had actually gained the financial and social backing of gouty conservative old Lord Lansmere, who, as President of the Club, ensured its success. Lansmere had been hard to win, but he had been impressed, of course, by the publicity given Hal and Doctor Marshall. And Hal had convinced the old gentleman that black sheep can turn white overnight. Having known Hal's people made a difference, and then—well, it *was* a perfectly sound proposition. It couldn't fail with Lansmere behind it.

Why, Lansmere had even insisted that his son, Eric Grey, be Hal's secretary. Thought it might

be a good thing for Eric to profit by the example of a reformed sinner. Eric was on the merry way to being a sinner, himself.

As she stood looking out of the open window of the old library she wondered, even now after four months, if it were true: if the bright scene before her were not a drop-curtain suddenly to be whisked away leaving her staring at the impersonal walls and plush furniture of some continental hotel bedroom. But there was no trickery in the cool dusk of the high wainscoted room with its shelves upon shelves of books, nor yet in the robust unstartled sweep of land lit by June.

Yes, this was Brassington Hall, this sturdy old house of wings and towers from which Hal had been exiled so long ago. And to think that now Hal was Honorary Secretary and Treasurer of the Brassington Golf Club. Hal a treasurer!

She touched the rose in the buttonhole of her jacket. Was this she, Nita, in a tweed suit with only a thin dusting of powder over a skin that was younger, healthier than it had been for many a day, and with lips that lifted more lightly under a diminished tracery of scarlet?

The new golf links, one hundred and fifty acres of Brassington land within an hour of London, dipped and curved, melting in pastures beyond, running along the thready gleam of a brook, rising in bunkers, flattening to the damask squares of putting greens. The first day of the tournament was on.

Against the clean blue sky Lansmere Abbey loomed feudal, dominating its hill. Over the grassy stretches below, players moved slowly, stooping in concentrated poses to rise with a swing of arms. A parasol opened like a flower. In blobs of colour, sweaters flashed across the green. Presently all these people—friends of Lansmere's, members of the Club—would gather for tea on the broad silken terrace of Brassington Hall. Hal needn't have made this lavish unnecessary gesture when the dower house fitted up as a club house could have provided just as well for its new members.

She wished they might have started out with a little less show, fewer servants, a more modest programme of entertainment.

That beastly portrait again! In this room, she always felt it, harsh, contemptuous, sneering at her from the heavy frame. She turned impatiently. In two opposite niches between oak book-shelves, Colonel Welsh and Mrs. Brassington-Welsh faced one another. Hal's mother, poor anæmic lady, sat in a faded pose of resignation, hair parted, hands folded, as if all her life had been drained away in vain appeals. And yet, house and land and the long line of Brassingtons reaching back, came from her. The old Colonel knew what he was doing when he married her. Look at him now glowering down with his harsh dark eyes. She resented the resemblance to Hal. Same thick brows, long nose, brick red colour. But there was no cheer in the expression of this un-

forgiving old man who seemed to be demanding——

"Who are *you?* I never heard of the Moffetts of Stamford. You were a fool to marry my son. Why have you hung on to him when any decent woman would have left him long ago?"

"I'm not that kind of a decent woman." She spoke aloud fiercely, standing like a boy, her hands thrust in the deep pockets of her jacket.

Absurd to allow a portrait to get so on one's nerves. She went back to the window. Why, there was Hal talking to a man. Dear old Hal in the rôle of a jovial country squire, standing with a horsey, wishbone curve to his legs, his check cap pulled over one eye, his dark moustache like a stirrup, on which was mounted a ruddy, beaming expression. In one of his expansive moods. Showing off. His hand, gripping that vile stubby pipe of his, swept out in a large encircling gesture which took in the countryside. All his—his golf course, his land, his England. How solid he looked in that Norfolk jacket and baggy breeches!

He looked up, waved with a boyish toss of his cap. His companion turned, and even at that distance, she felt the keen directness of his gaze. Bare-headed for this long-range introduction, he stood in relief against the brilliant light—spare of figure, long of arm, his hair bleached as grass in summer's heat. Not English. Her heart tapped the old note of fear against doors she had closed and locked.

She had never seen this man before. Smile and wave back. The sun picked her out as she stood framed in the ivy-crowned window.

"May I come in? How's everything?"

She hadn't heard the door open. "Everything's fine." She glanced over her shoulder at Eric Grey as he sauntered across the room. A bit seedy to-day. The pink of his cheek and blue of his eye were obviously recovering from a night in town.

He admitted his sins, standing loosely beside her, fingering his short, blond moustache. "I feel rotten," he said, as from one comrade to another.

"You look it." She tried to sound severe, but the engaging way he always assumed her indulgence disarmed her. She found herself recommending a nap.

"Just had one. I say, you know, you and the Major are rippin' good sports." He grinned down at her.

The glare of the sun was really too intense. She drew back with a suggestive motion toward the desk. "If you have any secretarial duties to attend to, I'd better go."

"Thanks awfully." He didn't look enthusiastic. "By Jove, there's old Hawkes with the Major. Must have nipped around here from the station. We were expecting him on the 2.10." Suddenly animated, he thrust his sleek head out of the window.

"Who is he?" She braved the light again.

Young Grey brushed by her as he righted himself

briskly. Jerry Hawkes? She must have heard of him. He owned one of the biggest sporting goods houses in the States—Hawkes & Browning. Quite a decent sort in spite of that. Keen on golf. Spent half of every year in England.

She watched the two men moving off below in the brilliant sunshine—the American scissor-shaped, steely. She could almost hear the boom of Hal's voice as he swaggered expansively beside his guest. They turned the right wing of the house.

"Is he playing in the tournament?"

Eric, frowning slightly, shook his head, lit a cigarette. "I hope those two hit it off."

"Why shouldn't they?" She hadn't meant that sharp note.

The young man hesitated. Perched on the edge of the big littered table, a knee looped over the corner, he studied her a moment. "It would simplify matters. The Governor's got quite a bit invested in the Club. Surprisin' how much it takes to set up a thing like this. He's in an awful funk and old Hawkes——"

She stood listening to his jerky explanations with a faint sense of chill as if she had moved from the saturating warmth of noon into the brusque shadow of stone walls. So Lansmere wasn't satisfied with the way things were going. He wanted this Jerry Hawkes to come in with them. Wanted to form a company. Hawkes had been invited down to look

over the proposition, incidentally to look Hal over, she supposed.

"You see, the Governor can't put up another bob," Eric explained, absently shoving aside the desk telephone. "Feels poorer than ever. I know because I tried to borrow a few quid from him the other day." He made a wry face.

She was in no joking mood. "A lot depends, then, on whether Mr. Hawkes thinks we're worth while?" Her voice kept its edge. Why did they have to drag in this stranger!

"I say, don't take it so hard." Eric slid from his careless pose. "Don't see, myself, what the Governor's makin' such a fuss about. We've employed local labour. They're not going to come down on us. Barry won't send in his bill for another three months. By then, the initiation fees——"

She stared at the small safe in the wainscoting behind the desk. Very little she didn't know about credit and unpaid bills. "What if Mr. Hawkes doesn't——"

"Oh, he'll come in. Practically told the Governor so," Eric assured her. "You see, he's thinkin' of buying a place around here. Jolly nice for him to have a control in the Club."

A control. How jolly would that be for Hal! She caught the sardonic eye of the portrait. Then from the window, the intense shimmer of blue drew her gaze. She was lost in it as in a shining prairie where nothing else counted.

"It's all right." Eric's voice roused her. He was fiddling with Hal's typewriter.

Oh, well, it would have to be all right. "Are you coming to the party?" Her lips parted, curled. Even in tweeds she could be arch, beguiling.

"Bally nuisance, teas," he affected to grumble, tapping the machine with one long shapely finger. His face was puckered like a small boy's doing sums.

She laughed. "Don't tire yourself."

As she closed the door, the tick of the machine stopped. No danger of his overworking. She reopened the door softly. He stood there staring at nothing—a dapper young man, exquisitely tailored. How suddenly old he looked. People off their guard had a way of looking old. But there was something else in the droop of his features as if a spring that held them together had relaxed. Worried. He hadn't been frank with her. He was worried about this business with Hawkes.

She closed the door again silently. The house spread very old and watchful about her. Light pried through a leaded window, lay shallow on the dark polished floor. From the far reaches of the gallery faces seemed to be peering at her—the stranger here.

With small hushed steps, she hurried to their room overlooking the rose garden. She moved shyly among faded chintz and Adams furniture. The maid had laid out everything—a white linen gown

with an embroidered surplice effect, white stockings, shoes. Hal evidently wasn't going to change.

What a day of roses, of bird notes and humming of bees in the air. England strong about her. Why spoil it by thinking of Jerry Hawkes. She thought of him.

2

She paused on the wide oak stairs to peer down at the great hall where among strong dark furniture and tapestries groups of florid gentlemen stood about as if they had strayed there by mistake and were waiting to be shown the way out. She didn't see herself in the picture. A shade too vivacious and blonde, perhaps, for such undemonstrative company.

From the shadows of the landing the portrait of Sir Philip Brassington gently mocked. A gallant creature in his furbelows—his lace and silks, his plumed hat set rakishly on his long curls. Very little he didn't know about men—and women. She caught his débonair smile and held it for her own as she trotted down the last steps.

There was Mr. Hawkes glancing around as if he were hunting for someone. He was of a crisper cut than the other men. You couldn't tell much from that impassive bronzed face accented by the oddly light hair. Young or old?

A gracious little woman in white, she advanced, head tilted back for a bright play of eye and mouth.

"Are you wondering where my husband is, Mr. Hawkes? So am I."

Yes, his eyes were grey, but he needn't look at her that way, as if he were a gimlet searching for a likely spot to drill through.

"Mrs. Brassington-Welsh?" He faintly underlined the Brassington. His voice was like a very fine wire in a wind. You could fancy messages that were not for you humming overhead.

"I've just left your husband." He hesitated. "Can you tell me where I can find Lord Lansmere? I believe he is to be here this afternoon."

Wasn't the man ever going to smile? Her own expression fluttered open and shut like a gay little fan for which one has no use. "Perhaps he's in the garden. Won't you let me give you some tea?"

The small graces of a hostess were lost on him. "Thank you, no." He moved as if he didn't wish to take up too much of her time.

Should she say anything about his business here? Better not. "I'm sorry." She flashed her smile again, inviting response.

"I'm sorry, too." He sounded sorry, and for an instant in that vibrant tone she thought she detected a special message for herself.

"I do hope you'll like us, Mr. Hawkes." That at least wasn't going too far.

Farther, however, than he meant to go. He bowed. And she knew that he wanted to get away. Her gesture released him.

Those steely grey eyes swiftly probed. Then she was left to watch his thin agile figure cross the hall, his long arms swinging at his sides.

A cool, hard man. Didn't like him. He and Hal would never agree. Well, they'd pull through somehow without Mr. Jerry Hawkes.

The big hall seemed suddenly crowded with furniture, flowers, people. Good heavens, of what was she thinking, standing here like a school girl? Little phrases came tripping graciously as she went forward to one, to the other.

"How do you do. Won't you have some tea?" "Yes, the buffet is in the blue room, and you'll find tables on the terrace." Oh, quite—oh, very. Beautiful day. Ripping game.

Voices like a scenic railway swooping up, swooping down and around curves. Red faces, brown faces. Women in abominable hats. Women with faces like sheep and horses, and little frizzled dogs. Women with beautiful skins, and loud breezy manners. The groups drifted, dissolved. She felt as if she had just taken her eyes and mouth out of curl papers.

Now where was Hal? Perhaps in the smoking room.

She knew him to be there before she reached the door. She heard the louder man-noise, the laughter, and above it all a hearty voice booming good cheer.

Yes, he would be in the centre of men in the leathered ease of that room, among pipe and cigar smoke and the tinkle of glasses. Major Brassing-

ton-Welsh astride of the occasion, off at a brisk gallop in the wind of a waggish humour. Red and jolly, he stood guffawing at his own stories. Eric Grey lounged beside him.

From the door, she watched him jovially clap Eric on the back to mark some point. How fond he was of the boy! Everything must be all right or he wouldn't——

He sighted her and roared a welcome. "Gentlemen, my wife."

And now she was among them flushed and smiling. They drew themselves up, very solemn as if she had caught them at mischief. Hal thundered out names with a wink and a joke for each—Mr. Furthering, Mr. Mannes-Carr, Captain Barclay——

"And Mr. McDonald, my dear, who has a Scotch eye on the Brassington cup." His laughter filled the room. "More cups than one, eh, McDonald?"

"Hal," she managed it discreetly. "May I speak to you a moment?"

"Certainly—certainly." He beamed down upon her, calling on them all to envy his privilege. "Domestic secrets. Wait till you're married, Eric, my boy."

Eric twinkled in her direction and strolled off, sleek as a young seal. The other men retreated to the farther end of the room. Hal stood huge and rollicking beside her, twirling his moustache.

"Hal, I think you ought to come out with me and talk to people."

"Been everywhere. Seen everyone," he rumbled.

"How did you get on with Mr. Hawkes?" she asked it suddenly.

"Oh, all right." He rocked to and fro, rubbing his chin, slanting at her down his nose.

Not his most convincing air. "How all right?"

"I say, old dear, this isn't the time——"

She knew that peevish note. Everything wasn't all right. "Hal, I wish you'd tell me."

"Well, I'm telling you," he mumbled. "Can't say I'm crazy about the fellow. He asks too damn many questions."

So he asked questions, did he? Other men were drifting into the room, a thirsty eye on the decanters. No place for her here. She turned away slowly.

Hal swaggered beside her to the door, chest thrust out, hands in his pockets. "I'll be along in a moment, old girl." He seemed relieved to get rid of her.

Everywhere a rattle of conversation. People sat, stood, drifted about as if the place belonged to them. Her little smile hung like a gay red rag that has been left to dry in the sun. But the warmth of the day had left her.

In the blue room of damask hangings and polished surfaces the small gilt chairs were pushed aside. Among devastated refreshments and fish-eyed servants, several old ladies of the scavenger type sat on, nibbling, gossiping. They peered at her inquisitively. A fat, hairy little man crammed the last of a pink

sugared cake into his mouth and slid away as if he were afraid she might speak to him.

At small tables on the terrace which opened out sharply green from the blue room, groups were still seated smoking, chatting. The men rose at her approach, the women handled their adjectives like lorgnettes. Parties were hateful, especially when as a hostess you seemed to be superfluous.

She wandered farther into the garden where fantastically clipped out of yew, Noah's ark animals perched on the broad hedges. Symmetrical. Everything was symmetrical—the flowers so bright in the bright air, these people so well groomed. Brassington Hall heaved up with tower and huge chimneys, rich and red of surface where ivy and creepers held back.

She turned along a pebbled path leading to a smaller rose garden. Scent of roses, of honey, of lavender. Good to be alone. Forget all these people. Hal loved his roses. He——

Eric came running toward her. His slim body seemed oddly disjointed. He drew nearer and she saw his face.

Something had happened.

He reached her, gripped her arm. "The Governor and your husband are having the most beastly row. I daren't interfere. Can you——?"

A row. Hal and Lord Lansmere! "Where?" She ran behind him. Her breath caught as on little hooks. A stitch in her side.

Splash of pink, of red, of white—the rose garden. Intolerable fragrance. A bird wheeled in the blue.

"I tell you, you're a scoundrel." Old Lansmere's voice was borne harshly through an open window. "You'll get out or——"

Eric held her back, screened by the bushes. "It's ghastly," he whispered. "There's old Barclay and —Don't let 'em see you."

"I'll be damned if I do." Hal bellowing.

Must stop it—stop it. Those people—she could see them through the bushes, gaping up at the window.

"Eric, try to get them away. I'll go——"

She went floundering, stumbling ahead. Must be a door somewhere in this wing. She found it. A narrow hall, then the pantry. The servants were huddled there. She brushed by them, by their staring eyes, their wooden bodies. The noise of quarrel exploded in the hush.

Yes, this was the door. She pushed it open, colliding against Jerry Hawkes who moved back stiffly.

In the small red room of dappled sunlight she saw only Hal standing, his eyes bloodshot, his fists clenched. Facing him, distorted with anger, Lord Lansmere, beak nosed, thin shouldered, leaned on his ivory-knobbed stick.

"What is it?" She crossed to close the window. "Everyone can hear you." Her voice sounded sharp as if she were scolding children. "Now what is it,

Hal——?" She went to him, laid a hand on his arm. He was trembling.

"Madam," Lord Lansmere glowered in her direction. "I think you had better leave us to settle this matter."

"I think not." She braved him, her green eyes bright with battle.

Hal's fury mounted again. "They want to drive me out, Nita." He was near to suffocation.

"Drive you out!" She turned slowly to Hawkes. He was the one. His doing.

"I've been forced," his voice slim and cold twanged through the tension, "to tell my friend, Lord Lansmere, why I will have nothing to do with the Brassington Golf Club while your husband holds office."

Hal wheeled about to glare at him. "You damn meddling——"

"Major!" The man didn't move, but his eyes warned.

Lansmere tramped back and forth, muttering.

They were hurting him. Under her hand, she felt his muscles twitch. "What does this mean, Hal?"

"Mr. Hawkes has discovered that I am myself." His voice was thick and bitter. "Myself apparently can't be trusted to hold a gentleman's position. So—Lord Lansmere has asked me to resign." His shoulders heaved as he laboured for breath. "I'm to be driven out, Nita."

But they couldn't do this. Her clasp tightened on

his arm. Steady now. Steady. Keep their heads clear.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Brassington-Welsh." Hawkes was looking at her.

Sorry! He had said that once before. And he had gone ahead.

"When Lord Lansmere spoke to me about the Club," he said, "I was under the impression that Mr. Brassington had always lived here. I should have recognised at once the hyphenated name."

"We weren't hiding," she flung at him.

Lansmere tapped his stick on the floor. "You were hiding the notorious reputation of your husband, Madam."

"Leave my wife out of it," Hal thundered.

If only they would be quieter. Their voices jangled in her head.

Hawkes lifted his hand. "A moment, please. I put it up to your husband squarely. I asked him if he had ever known a friend of mine, a Mr. Crawford. He didn't deny it."

"My past life is no one's business." Hal struggled for control.

"I make it my business, sir," the old gentleman snapped. "You knew that I should never have permitted my name to be associated with that of a man who deserves to be in prison."

Hal started. She held him back. "That isn't fair," she cried and turned on Hawkes. "We didn't invite you here. It's our house. Why did you——?"

"You can't do it," Hal burst out again. "You can't force me——"

"And I tell you I can," Lansmere shouted, waving his stick.

She gave a hard little laugh. "Well, Mr. Hawkes, you've managed to stir up a good deal of mud. Not very sportsmanlike of you, is it?"

"If I thought—" Hawkes looked closely at Hal, who was tugging at his moustache.

Lansmere stumped over to the door. "I'll have nothing more to do with you, sir. I'll make the county too hot for you. You'll be forced to leave."

With a movement that shook her hand from his arm, Hal stubbornly squared his shoulders. "You'll have to use force then." He stood huge, braced against the wall. "By God, I'm here and I'll stay here in my own house, on my own land. You can't run your club without my consent, sir."

"We'll see about that." Lansmere flung open the door. Slammed it.

Jerry Hawkes lingered behind. "I didn't think your husband would stand up to us," he said slowly. "The man I heard about is a bully, a liar, and a coward. You've got pluck, Major."

Hal tried to speak. Turned his back, walked to the window.

And now those grey eyes were upon her, gravely appraising. "I want to think this over. May I come around in the morning?" His voice was gentle.

She didn't need his pity. Never wanted to see him

again. She held her head high, gave him look for look. "You may not."

"I'll be here at nine," he said steadily.

Her fingers plucked at her white skirt, crumpling it. If he would only go. Leave them alone.

He went, softly closing the door.

The little room seemed full of faces, hating faces, mocking faces. Everyone against them. No sound from Hal. They must cling close together.

With a sob, she flew to him—"My dear—my dear!"

How old he looked in the waning light! Mottled of cheek and grey about the mouth. He sank into a chair. "Just my hellish luck!"

She touched his hair, his poor grizzled hair, his damp forehead. A passion of tenderness welled up within. He grasped her hand in his big moist one.

She tried to comfort—"Never mind, dear. We won't let them."

He sprang up with a sudden strong movement. "Come on, Nita." He strode to the door.

Where was he going? What did he mean to do? Better stay here until they had all gone. She reached him swiftly. "Hal, what are you——?"

"I'm host in my own house," he said. "Coming, old girl?"

He meant to face those people! She couldn't go like this. Wait a moment, only a moment. Beat back the tears, smooth her hair, her skirt. A deep breath. "Coming," she said.

The blue room was empty. But from the hall came a rustle of people. Funny to watch their sidelong embarrassed glances as they tried to slip out. But Hal blocked their way.

She stood there beside him in the big door, her lips lifted in the old trained smile. They had to pass him, had to stop when he spoke to them.

"Good-bye—good-bye." "So kind of you to have come." "McDonald plays to-morrow." Hal's voice deep and throaty. Her own voice unfamiliar.

From the stairway high up in the shadows the portrait of Sir Philip Brassington gently mocked. Life was a game indeed.

"Good-bye—good-bye." Her lips ached as she held to her little smile. Her neck seemed to stretch, to grow longer as she held up her head. Tall as Hal. Shoulder to shoulder.

3

Someone had to see Jerry Hawkes. If Hal wouldn't——

He wouldn't. His fine defiance had not lasted through the interminable night. Poor old Hal, he had one of his mean headaches. He was like a sick creature seeking cover for a while. Snarling and savage at those who had wounded him. Didn't want to see anyone. Wanted to be left alone.

Better leave him alone until he took hold again. She too was sick—sick at heart, but the Hawkes man

shouldn't know it. Oh, he would be sorry for what he had done before she finished with him!

She waited in the library. Among those high dark bookshelves under the lowering gaze of Colonel Welsh, she was keyed to a vivid performance. But, oh, how old she had felt at dawn with Hal lying there beside her, unwieldy in sleep, uneasily breathing!

From her post at the window she stared out over the shining country which had the swept, dusted look of any well ordered house early in the morning. Lansmere Abbey on its hill rose up grimly. You couldn't destroy a symbol like that as you could a Nita or a Hal. The stuff of their life was shabby —darned, patched and stained. Just because they had stopped by the roadside to wash their threadbare garments; had turned them inside out, tricked them into shape with a pin, a stitch, they had thought themselves decently clothed for the end of the journey. But the stuff was the same, and not good enough, she supposed, to rub up against the Hawkes and the Lansmeres of this world.

Was there any use in trying?

A knock on the door. Yes, he would be on time.

"Come in." She was ready with the hard clever little smile of a woman for whom life is a twisted comedy that she can play.

He stood in the doorway, a quiet grey figure, his hair palely gleaming.

Should she offer him her hand? His long arms

swung loosely at his sides. Didn't want to shake hands with her. Oh, well! Her voice sounded hard and brisk. "Now, Mr. Hawkes, I'm sure you realise that you can't——"

He came forward, his hand out. Didn't say a word, only looked at her. Jerry Hawkes of Illinois looking straight at Nita Moffett of Connecticut.

She took his hand. Then suddenly— "It's true, of course," she said. "Hal and I have had a rotten hard life." After a pause, she said. "That time in Florence was only one of many others. You know that." Her voice seemed to come from someone else.

"Yes, I know it." And it was as if he fingered shabby stuff without tearing it, knowing that the quality had once been good.

Well, it was a relief after all. You couldn't hide anything from a man with eyes like that. Let him do what he wished. The game was up. Her gesture told him as much. She moved to the window and drooped there in the sunlight. The shapely world outside glittered with a green that hurt her eyes. A few players straggled in sight. Bitterness mounted acrid on her tongue. What a fool she'd been to give herself away, to give Hal away! She whirled around with a passionate fling of her head.

"Can't a man ever get up when he's down? Even if he has done wrong in the past, is that a reason for hounding him when he's trying so hard—!" Tears in her eyes smarted.

He was coming toward her. Shame that he should see her weak and beaten. She grew bright and hot —a fire kindled to hold him off. But he drew close. It was not the face of an enemy.

"I believe in fair play," he said.

Then there *was* a chance! If he believed in fair play—all she asked for. Of what use pride before those keen eyes, that steady mouth. Tell him—make him understand. "You've always had a home. You've always been safe. This is the first time we've had a home in years and years. And Hal cares—can't you see that he cares? Look—!" her gesture swept outward over the land. "That's Hal. He planned it all. He put it over. Until you came——"

"If you can convince me—" he began.

"Convince you!" Her laugh broke short, bitter. "If you had any idea what our life has been all these years, you wouldn't need any convincing. Never a place we could call our own, never a penny we could count on. Oh, it was all our fault if you will——"

"Not yours," he rapped out.

Trying to put it all on Hal, was he? There was your gallant man. But he hadn't thought of her yesterday. "Our fault," she repeated. "You can't separate us. And understand this, please, Mr. Hawkes—" Under taut light brows her eyes narrowed. "Hal may have done lots of things he shouldn't. But he's never hurt anyone as you've hurt him. Knocking about takes the edge off a man.

He's old, Hal is, and tired. He's had enough of it. That's why when you——"

She had moved him. His expression lifted like a steel curtain for a softer play of feature. "What can I do?" he asked abruptly.

Her answer was ready. "You can make Lansmere hush up yesterday's scandal. You can promise him your backing with things as they are. If you and he stand behind Hal——"

"I'll be frank with you, Mrs. Brassington-Welsh."

She had heard men use that tone before—the crisp note that went with mahogany desks and secretaries. Follow his mood. No more emotion. She nodded, serious, businesslike.

"There's a hard, practical streak in me." He turned to pace up and down as if he were dictating. "I've worked all my life until I was forty-eight. I'm forty-nine now."

"Hal's fifty-two," she softly interrupted.

"My father gave me a chance when I was a boy, and I took it." He clipped his words short. "It's very difficult for me to have any sympathy for men who have never done an honest stroke of work. Understand?"

Yes, she understood.

"Now—" He came to a standstill before her. "A man who has lived on his wits for so many years forms habits not easily broken. His moral muscles —know what I mean?—grow flabby. He may think he's strong enough and fit enough to exercise honesty.

But is he?" He shot the question at her. "How long will it last?"

She met his probing grey eyes. "I had hoped to the end of our lives."

In silence they measured one another. "Your husband is treasurer," he said at last, and the wiry voice hummed again as with messages passing over her head. "The organisation, its finances, depend on him. I've looked into what it costs to run a place like this. I know what your husband expects to get out of it. He may think it's enough to live on. I doubt that. What would he do if he discovered that he had underestimated his profits?"

"He would never—" she cried hotly.

With a swift lift of his arm he pointed his long wiry forefinger at her. "You guarantee your husband?"

"I do." Out before she knew it, clear and ringing. But hidden deep within, something stirred uneasily.

"Then I—" He broke off to listen, and her heart winging upwards seemed to drop as before a hunter's gun.

A noise at the door had swung him around. Hal's bulk stood framed there a moment. Why did he have to come just now?

He should never have shown himself this way to Jerry Hawkes. He was haggard, unshaven, glassy of eye. Behind him in the dark gallery she saw dimly the forms of two men.

"Of all damned insolence!" He strode forward,

ignoring the American who sauntered to the window. "Every cringin' puppy we've been dealing with here has come down on us with bills."

He would spoil it all—everything she had worked for. He was overwrought, ungovernable. And Jerry Hawkes—she dared not look at him. The hot blood pounded in her head. Unpaid bills—unpaid bills. Did he have the money? Only last week they had run short.

"As if it weren't enough to have the butcher, the grocer, the servants—the old bloody lot of them plaguin' the life out of me," Hal was roaring. "Barry Gibbons here presents me with a bill for two hundred pounds' worth of work on the club house. Wasn't to have been handed in for another three months."

The man stood glumly in the doorway. "There's been talk around and we want our money," he mumbled.

"You'll get your money, damn you." Hal wheeled on him. "But the next time we want any work done, we'll go somewhere else."

"That's all right, sir." The other man peered over Barry's shoulder. She knew them both to nod to. They had always been so courteous, so pleasant. But now——

Her little smile riveted to her lips, she stepped forward. "Hal dear, can't you settle later? Mr. Hawkes is——"

For answer, he turned heavily to the safe in the

wainscoting behind the desk. Knelt and fumbled with the combination.

Hawkes turned from the window. She felt his cool eyes upon her. Make another effort. "Hal, I'm sure Mr. Gibbons will come back this afternoon. You'd better consult Lord Lansmere before——"

"I'll consult no one." His shoulders were stubbornly set. Above his collar, his neck flamed red and angry. "I'm goin' to pay those blasted fools out of that money Lansmere and I drew last week for emergencies—two hundred and fifty pounds."

The safe swung open. He jerked at a small drawer. She moved to look over his shoulder, and Hawkes strolled nearer.

Her heart stood still. The drawer was empty.

"Where the devil?" Hal began nervously throwing papers on the floor. His hands shook.

It was all right, of course. No one could have——

He swayed forward, gaping at the safe, his face flabby and grey under red patches. Everything was out now, strewn on the floor. "I thought I had——"

Why didn't he get up and say something to these people? Face them. Explain.

"Missing?" Hawkes stood steely beside her. The two men pressed nearer.

"I can't think—" Hal muttered. He scrambled to his feet, looking dazed. She wanted to go to him, but her feet were weighted as if with lead. There was a buzzing in her head.

"This is a serious matter." Jerry Hawkes cut

through the silence. "You say you put Club money in that safe, and now it's gone?"

She must do something—move, speak. "Hal, surely it's there." She slipped to her knees, hunted among papers, hunted in the safe. Nothing. The men watched her, dark, glowering. Drag herself up. Dust on her skirt. Brush it off. "Hal, are you sure you put it——?"

"Hello, what's up?" Eric Grey lounged in. He stopped short, seemed to click together, his blue eyes staring at the open safe, the scattered papers. "I say——"

Jerry Hawkes spoke sharply. "These men want to be paid for their work. There was two hundred and fifty pounds in that safe, and your treasurer can't explain where it is."

"Oh, but I say—" The young man stepped backward as if he had been struck.

Was Eric going to believe what Hawkes was believing, what they all—? She couldn't stand it.

As through a mist, she saw him turn on the men. Heard him— "Of all confounded nerve, your coming here and dunning us. You've known my father, Barry, for twenty years. You're sure of your money."

"But, Mr. Grey—" Barry protested.

Splendid the way the boy faced them. She would never forget it. You could tell how upset he was, but he didn't flinch.

His voice rose strained, youthful— "Shame on

you, Barry. And you, Harry Green. You'll get your money and you know it. Now, will you please go?"

Only a Lansmere could have done it. They hesitated, glanced at one another, at Eric. Then they shuffled out.

Why didn't Hal assert himself? A crippling fear held her motionless. He was so happy-go-lucky. Suppose he had confused the accounts! How had he paid their bills these last months?

"Look here, Major," Eric stepped suddenly up to him. "I came over to tell you how sorry I was that the Governor made such a bally mess of things, yesterday. Better he shouldn't know of this now. The rotten money'll turn up. I'll see Barry again, myself."

Well, they had one friend. She could hardly bear to look at them together—the boy flushed, agitated, Hal dark and heavy with that dazed stare in his eyes.

But when Eric spoke to him, he straightened his shoulders. The old Hal coming back.

"My boy—" he said, and could get no further.

"Lord Lansmere must know of this at once." It came straight and pitiless from Jerry Hawkes. "I presume you have nothing to conceal, Major?"

"Of course not," Hal whirled about, his thick eyebrows knotted in a scowl.

"But I say," Eric protested. "You know the Governor, Mr. Hawkes. He'll make no end of a row. Why not give the Major a few days? I——"

Hawkes didn't even answer. He moved to the door, his face set and cold. No hope from him. After all that had passed between them, she would ask for no mercy.

Eric gripped Hal's hand. "I'll do all I can, Major," and he dashed out of the room after Hawkes.

Hal sat heavily down on a chair by the desk.

And the fear darted back, stabbing. She hardly dared move or breathe now that they were alone—alone with Colonel Welsh and Angela Brassington looking down; alone with the June light streaming in, falling on the scattered papers, the open safe, on Hal's thick grizzled hair.

She must know the truth. She went with slow leaden steps over to him. The touch of her hand on his shoulder, the feel of the tweeded stuff gave her strength.

"Hal, look at me."

He raised his head, and she saw his poor old face so deeply lined, his forlorn bloodshot eyes. Even if he had—even if he had——

She whispered—"Hal, did you?"

"No, Nita." His voice sounded dreary. "But it's all the same. They won't believe me."

How could she ever have doubted? Standing over him, she drew his head close to her breast. His forehead was wet. She bent to kiss it.

Someone had taken the money. The servants?

Impossible. Only Hal and Lansmere knew the combination of the safe.

It came in a flash.

"Hal, Lansmere took that money."

"Nita!" Hal sprang to his feet. "You're crazy! Lansmere take his own money? Lansmere!"

"Listen, Hal, yesterday when he went off, he said he'd force you to leave, didn't he? He knew the combination of the safe, didn't he?" Her voice rose shrill with excitement.

"Yes, but—I won't believe it." Hal sounded his old vigorous note. Defending the Lansmere name, the county, England.

"He did it," she cried. "It's a plant. Don't forget he said you deserved to be in prison. Don't forget that he thinks he can't afford to lose Hawkes. And Hawkes wanted you out. Can't you understand?" She clutched his arm. "It was the one way to drive you out. Something definite. You could have held your ground otherwise——"

Hal stood as if she had struck him. Then, "Oh, Lord," he groaned. "If it's so, we're done for." She hadn't realised that. Lansmere meant them to escape—run away. Yes, he would want them out of the way. Disgrace. Ruin.

She followed Hal to the window. His arm went around her, crushed her close.

The telephone. Its sharp ring shattered the silence. Hal didn't move. She would go.

Eric on the wire. His voice was almost unrecog-

nisable. Poor boy, he had done all he could. He shouldn't take it so hard.

"The Governor's coming over with Hawkes. Don't see him before I get there. I must see you first." Abruptly, he rang off.

Could it be possible that he knew what his father had done? And was he perhaps coming over to stand by them? He would never dare. Too afraid of his father. Better not give Hal any hope.

"It was Eric. He's coming over."

Hal stood where she had left him. She sat down in the chair beside the desk to wait.

4

He must have run across the fields. His shirt was open at the throat, his hair damp. Standing on the threshold of the library, he breathed a moment in short, gasping breaths.

She rose with a little cry. "Mr. Grey——!"

Hal turned slowly from the window, hastened forward. "My dear boy!"

"They'll be here any moment. They stopped to see Barry. I did my best——"

"My dear boy," Hal said again.

"I came to tell you." He spoke jerkily as if there were not much time. "It's my fault, Major. You left the safe open day before yesterday. I—borrowed the money. I thought you wouldn't need it

for several months. Barry's bill wasn't to be sent in——"

Silence that rocked about her as if they were all huddled in a rudderless boat. Then the young voice going on and on. A debt of honour in London. Couldn't wait. No one would lend him a penny. Some money coming to him next month from a small inheritance. Meant to pay back then.

She had lived through this before somewhere, somehow. She knew it as one remembers the turn of a road over which, ages ago, one has travelled. She watched the light strike across the room picking out the gilt letters of books.

Hal made a choking sound in his throat.

"I tried to borrow from Hawkes on our way home. I was desperate. No use though. If only I could have got the Governor to hold off from you until I could——"

Eric, their young friend, gay, débonair Eric with his face twisted pitifully telling them these things!

She moved close to Hal. Linked her arm in his.

And still the young voice went on. "I couldn't stand by and let you take the blame, Major. Really too rotten. But isn't there anything we can do? Can't you think of anything? The Governor will never forgive. He's that sort." His hand went to his eyes. "I'm done for."

That was what Hal had said. Done for—done for. Eric didn't know what that meant.

"I say, Eric—I say—" Hal's voice, strange, throaty.

"Can't you think of anything? My God, Major, I've been a fool. Thrown my life away for two hundred and fifty pounds."

"But surely he won't—" She heard her own voice trying to console.

His laugh was worse than tears. "Won't he, though? I got into a scrape last winter. He let me off, but he said then that it was the last time. Not a chance. Oh, well, I deserve it." He turned aside with an effort at control.

Silence again. She felt Hal cleaving to her as if she had passed into him and he into her. Years drifted by—the years they had lived. Between them something stirred trying to get up, something that had lain in the dark for a long, long while and grown weak. It fluttered between them. She pressed his arm more tightly. Ah, but it hurt, this strange thing lifting its cramped wings. It had claws that dug deep into the heart as it poised for flight.

Hal stretched out his hand. She saw it large, heavy, resting there on the boy's shoulder.

It was hard for Hal to talk. He sounded rusty, like very old machinery set in motion. "You've got the right stuff in you, Eric. Damn decent of you. Acted like a gentleman. Tradition, Eric. We slip up on it sometimes. But it counts—it counts—"

For a second he glanced at the portrait of his father.

Steady, Hal. The thing is too big. Be careful—careful.

"It's up to one of us." His voice was gruff.

Eric nodded.

"Well, I haven't much to say for myself." He seemed to lift each word with an enormous effort from a secret hiding place. She went with him down to that secret place and up again.

He said, "I'm a pretty tattered old flag, my boy. Been through a lot. I'm not proud of it. No, my life is nothing to be proud of. What there is left of it—well, there's Nita; it's for her to say."

His arm trembled under her touch. For her to say! Their whole life,—what was left of it. Rotten mess. Rotten. Look at the boy. He hasn't understood. Hal was like that once. The pity of it! She glanced toward the window. Bright out there—roses, papers on the table fluttered in a breeze. She lifted her head to look at Hal. The frail thing that had risen between them peered startled from his eyes.

What if they fought on here with Lansmere broken, the boy thrown out? Never be the same again. Never. Eric was weak and the world would take him and grind him to tatters. Enough débris in the world already.

The tap of a stick sounded in the gallery. Then Lansmere's voice. Eric gave a little gasp.

Once long ago she had seen a picture of a boy, his back against a wall facing a firing line. Eric looked like that. And he had been decent. He might have——

"Well, old girl?" from Hal.

It was for her to decide. Quickly then—"Eric, you must leave this to us. For the sake of what Hal has suffered—only remember——"

"Nita!" All Hal could say. It was all there. Smile up at him—a twisted little smile.

The door opened. Lansmere stamped in Behind him came Jerry Hawkes.

Eric hadn't understood. He moved jerkily forward. She caught his arm. "Keep still." And she looked up to meet the American's keen grey eyes.

"What's this I hear?" Lansmere spoke harshly. "Where's that money?" He advanced on Hal, fierce as a sharp-beaked bird about to strike.

Hal drew himself up. "I don't know where the money is."

"Come—come, I can't believe it. Of course you know," Lansmere fumed. "Who else knows if you don't?"

"I haven't the money." Hal faced him firm, erect. "I understand how serious this is. You've won, Lord Lansmere. I resign. I—my wife and I will leave——"

"No, you won't." A gouty old man beside himself with rage. "I'll have you arrested, sir."

Young Grey stepped forward, deathy pale. She put out her hand again and drew him back. His father wasn't looking at him.

She whispered—"Eric, you must for my sake." There was that in her eyes and voice that held him quiet.

Hal at the desk was gathering up papers, sorting them. "I'll hand over my reports——"

"May I speak to you a moment?" Hawkes stood at her elbow.

She moved listlessly with him to the window. Eric sank into a chair, covered his face with his hands. Well, he had his chance.

Hawkes bent nearer, sunlight on his hair. "I won't allow it. I won't have you sacrificed. Your husband didn't take that money."

So he knew. She was glad that he knew. She turned her head away. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean." His voice was urgent. "I'm not blind. And the young fool tried to borrow two hundred pounds from me. I suspected then, but I wasn't sure until I saw you three together."

Behind her, Lansmere violently threatened. She heard the shuffling of papers.

"You mustn't interfere, Mr. Hawkes." She looked into the face of a friend, of a man whom she might have met long, long ago.

"You're going to take the blame?"

A word, and in spite of Hal, of Eric, he would—No, too late. Play fair—must play fair. "Yes,"

she said simply. "We couldn't live on here anyway. Not now—and the boy is worth saving. If he'd been Hal—you understand?"

She heard Hal— "Here are the cheque books. Now you'd better——"

Eric went softly out of the room.

It seemed as if many moments passed. Then Jerry Hawkes said—"God bless you!"

And it was as if someone very dear to her had taken her to the gates of a station and sped her on a long, perilous journey with something to remember, something to cherish forever and ever.

No time for emotion. Hawkes was speaking again crisply, rapidly. "I'll take on the house and give your husband a cheque, of course, for the remaining months he has paid on his lease. Is there anything else?"

"Hal will want to pay whatever bills he owes here—out of that cheque."

He knew what she meant. He would see that Hal did pay. But suppose Lansmere had them arrested! "You won't let Lord Lansmere——?"

"Count on me."

One other thing. She gazed out at the bright country for the last time. "If you could—lend Eric the money and leave him in this room alone—when we're gone. He'll pay you back next month."

"Count on me," he said again. His hand gripped hers. Then she turned away.

Lansmere bent muttering over the desk. Hal

stood quietly by. Strange that he should be standing under his father's portrait.

She went out softly without a word to him. He was safe with Jerry Hawkes.

Eric waited for her in the dusk of the gallery. His young face pitifully appealed. "I despise myself——"

Hal young—Hal being saved. And she was doing this.

He took her hand, raised it reverently to his lips. "I shall never forget. My whole life——"

"I know." She started up the stairs, and looked back to smile down on him. He stood as a young traveller at the cross-roads. She feared nothing for him. But she and Hal—at the cross-roads—ah, that was another question.

From the shadowy landing, Sir Philip gently mocked. There was a gallant sadness, a shared knowledge in his mocking. She felt all the Brassingtons ghostly behind him. Hal's heritage that he was giving over. No, not giving over.

She could hear the voices of the men in the library. Hawkes was taking charge. Presently Hal would come to her, and then they would set forth together.

Where? No matter.

Very slowly, she turned and went on up the stairs to pack.

CHAPTER VI

SOMETHING CHEAP

I

YOU couldn't live indefinitely on the spirit of high sacrifice. They had played, and chosen to lose. They would have lost anyway. Was that a consolation? She thought of the portrait of Sir Philip; of his gentle mocking smile. Just so would he have gone forth. But with feather and sword. Hal wore his feather and sword only in the presence of an audience. He was shorn of glory in private. He had had his moment, and was stricken with what he called his luck—his damn bad luck. But it went deeper than that; it went too deep. He had been pierced to the heart of him, touched in the heart of him.

It was too much—really too much. You couldn't ever feel the same after it. She couldn't. When you had what you most wanted and relinquished it because——

No use being sorry. No use in even feeling that you had given the best in you when that best drove you out and on——

On to what? Hal had suggested Vienna as being

cheap, and God knows they needed something cheap. Vienna had another advantage. No one would know them there—at first.

But getting there was a nightmare. Hal had insisted on going by boat to Ostend. For two days he had gambled—winning, losing, winning enough to carry them on.

Then Berlin, heavy, indigestible, with its heavy hating people, its police hounding strangers. Hal getting into daily rages until you would have thought the entire war was fought and won by Major Brassington-Welsh. He almost convinced himself that he had fought. She dreaded going out with him on the streets. He stalked along with such fierce glares. Once they were nearly arrested because of a scene he had made in a restaurant.

The next day they had left for Vienna. All this time Hal had declared he was going straight. He was going, so far as she could see, nowhere at all except perhaps to seed. It was hardly enough to say that you meant to earn an honourable living because, after all, Brassington blood meant something, by Jove. Noblesse oblige! It hadn't obliged him yet to do more than talk. He did that beautifully. But unless he did more than that soon, they had better lay themselves down on the nearest dust heap. There were plenty in Vienna.

Too bad that he had chosen such a depressing town in which to be virtuous, and had spent down to their last pound while he waited for something

worthy of him to turn up. Nothing had turned up, of course, but bills and a final warning from the manager of the Bristol Hotel. Meanwhile they were lucky to have found a mean little flat, a mean roof over their heads.

Her temper was tried to the edge. Hal wasn't the only one who had sacrificed himself for Eric Grey. You would have thought he was.

This afternoon she was feeling that she couldn't bear it much longer. Hal had a visitor. What did anyone want with Hal? She leaned against the imitation tiled wall of the tiny kitchen trying to hear what they were saying in the next room. But their lowered voices reached her only as a muffled sound.

She had been washing the luncheon dishes when the bell rang and Hal, unshaven, in dressing gown and slippers, had slouched to the door. Her own appearance was nothing to boast of. She had let herself run down since they came to this flat. Her blue silk kimono, loosely pinned, gaped over a limp black satin petticoat. She wore a pair of tarnished silver evening slippers from which she had ripped the buckles. Her hair needed waving. And her hand, in the mechanical wielding of a cigarette, wafted under her disgusted nostrils, a smell of grease and soap suds.

No use moping any longer. She took up the stringy rag with a sigh. How she hated it all; hated this filthy kitchen with its reek of sausage and sharp

young Heurigen wine; hated the scum formed over the dish pan, the charred matches on the scorched oil cloth, the water trickling from wet plates onto the dirty floor.

She kicked an empty whiskey bottle thrust between the sink and small cupboard. It was the last bottle Hal was likely to see, with whiskey at ninety thousand kronen. Oh, well, he could still wheedle a drink from a chance acquaintance at Anna's Bar. And then there was Mrs. Wilbur Pratt at the Bristol with her cocktails and dinners. That's what he had come to.

Only one clean dish cloth. Better wipe the glasses first. Flecks of lint clung to their thick sides. She thought of the polished crystal of Brassington Hall and closed her eyes to see again that bright secure land.

Suffocating in here. She opened the door which she had closed as the stranger passed by. The door of the sitting room was ajar.

Hal's voice, lacking the old hearty note, rumbled through the hall. "Speak more plainly, Mr. Wertner. You say the Austrian government held back a few of the pictures claimed by the Italians after the war, and that these pictures are now being secretly sold? What's that got to do with your picture?"

"It is a good story, *nicht wahr?*" drifted from the stranger. "A story to interest a rich American lady. Is she not in our poor city with her dollars to pick up

bargains? And does her husband not collect art treasures?"

Hal sounded impatient. "Yes, but this picture of yours?"

"I have a friend, a genius," came dreamily from this Mr. Wertner. "Before the war he worked often in the museum. Even experts could not tell the difference between his copies and the originals. It is very sad. He is starving now." A brief pause and then in a brisker tone—"The picture of which I speak is one of his finest."

"And you want me to persuade Mrs. Pratt that it belongs to the Austrian government?" Hal's voice deeper, as if he were thinking it over.

"Quite so," pleasantly admitted this new friend of his. "But if you prefer, you have only to introduce me to the lady as a secret official agent for the sale of these pictures. For such an introduction alone, I shall give you—shall we say in your language seventy-five pounds?"

So this was the kind of nice sociable little time they were having! Back to his old tricks. Worn stuff that has been to the cleaners, stuff in which the old spots and stains reappear with wear. Seventy-five pounds for an introduction to that silly selfish Pratt woman. Seventy-five pounds. Enough for a new start somewhere else. She flung her cigarette to the floor, crunched it flat with her heel.

They were talking again. She crept into the dark

narrow hall, hugging her kimono about her. Peered into the little room.

"And if you don't come in at all? If I sell your damn copy for you?" Hal stood heavy and dark amongst the clutter of light maple furniture. His face was congested, a red and black blob in the hot July light which beat through lace curtains and fell on the shiny spots of his black corded silk dressing gown.

"We go halves," softly answered the blond young man. As he sat there facing Hal, he was like a recently polished coin fallen in a dingy place. He shone and tempted, his bright blue eyes roving from the dead spinach green of the wall, with its crawly red pattern, to a glass of stale water, and an aspirin tube on the table.

She shrank back in the shadows of the hall. A cracked mirror hung dimly at one end of it. She seemed to see reflected there a tall military figure, ruddy of cheek, sparkling of eye—the old Major Brassington-Welsh handling dubious stuff with the flourish of an expert selling rare material. And now here was this man offering— Oh, what would become of them either way?

There was silence again between the two men. She moved closer to the door. You could tell that Hal was nervous. He jerked out of his pocket the old blackened pipe he had smoked at Brassington Hall. Fingered it, rammed it back in his pocket. Plucked at his long droopy moustache, turning this

way and that like a man who seeks to escape from something within, something nibbling and galling.

Mr. Wertner sat now with his bland profile turned toward her. He had lit a cigarette and was thoughtfully studying a dusty bunch of artificial flowers in a liverish coloured vase—an ornament she particularly detested. It was he who spoke first. "We do business, *Herr Oberst?*"

Should she walk into the room and interrupt this amiable conversation? Or call Hal out and tell him—tell him what? Didn't know herself what she wanted, weak contemptible creature that she was.

Hal had fidgeted himself out of her range. Why didn't he answer?

Suddenly he sailed into view. "My dear fellow, I'd like awfully to oblige you, but really, you know—I don't do that sort of thing."

It was his manner of saying it, of doing it—that pompous voice, a shade patronising, and the majestic way he stood draped in his dressing gown as if facing a large and appreciative audience. He was being noble. She knew that expression. He put it on lately whenever she tried to shame him into getting a job.

Wertner had risen. Easy to see that he hadn't expected such an answer. "But I thought— Supposing we say one hundred pounds."

Hal considered this handsome offer from unassailable heights. Then he wagged his head with a virtuous droop of an eyelid.

Well, she might have spared her poor conscience its emotions. Hal's triumphant air of goodness was funny. She wanted to laugh. Wanted to throw back her head and let out the rusty jangling laughter that choked in her throat.

Wertner drew out his wallet and from it several bills—crisp solid English bills. "One hundred pounds," he murmured.

She caught her breath. Enough to buy bales of kronen. One hundred pounds, almost five hundred dollars, and they had about ten dollars left in the world.

Hal made a clicking noise, his tongue against his teeth, something like a father chiding a naughty small boy. "I wouldn't touch it," he said, as if Wertner had offered to give him the pest. "Besides," he thrust out his chest and flipped up the end of his moustache, "I'm expecting something **big** to turn up any day now."

So that was that. Wertner shrugged his shoulders, bowed stiffly. Good gracious, he mustn't find her here. "Allow me—my card in case—" she heard him say as she fled back to the kitchen.

She closed the door. Well, she was glad, of course. Hal had his own magnificent way of handling situations. It was only when there were no situations to handle that his glow waned to a mere inefficient flicker. Meanwhile, here she was back again in her kitchen among sour smells and busy

flies with those ten dollars between themselves and the street.

Thank Heaven, the Wertner man was going at last. She heard his step and Hal's heavier tramp down the hall. Hal's recovered round tones seemed to blow his guest out. In a better temper than he was at lunch.

"Nita—I say Neetah, where are you?"

He knew perfectly well where she was.

She found him basking in the light of his virtue as he padded to and fro between the sitting room and the adjoining hole they called the bedroom.

He pranced up to her bursting with his news. "I've had the most unhingin' time——"

"I know, I was in the hall." Cruel of her to cut his effect.

"The devil you were." He descended from his superior heights to eye her suspiciously. Then soared again.

Extraordinary how easy it was to be decent once you got started, said he. A year ago he wouldn't have hesitated. Why, the Pratt woman had asked him only the other day what she could bring back to her husband for a birthday present to prove to him what wonderful things one could pick up here. She'd swallow whole that story about the Austrian government. "But I couldn't do it," he ended, and with a sidelong glance he strolled over to a small mirror which surmounted a hideous art-nouveau desk. "I thought of you, old girl, and I——"

"Leave me out of it," slipped from her sharply. Foolish to feel so annoyed because he expected her to pat him on the back.

He swung about, a ridiculous injured expression clouding him over—"Good Lord, Nita, you surely don't mean you wish I'd gone into the thing?"

"Certainly not," she snapped. A mean little nagging spirit prodded her on. She sat down by the table. Stray crumbs on the tablecloth. The usual corpses in the grimy ash tray. Wertner must think they lived like pigs. So they did.

"I don't understand you, Nita." His beautiful mood was wearing off.

She leaned her elbows on the table, cupped her chin in her hands, and head tilted, light eyebrows raised, she looked at him with her bitter green eyes.

He scowled at the ugly red and green wall paper, his hands dug deep in his pockets dragging them out of shape.

"Well—what now?" Her voice pricked like a thin teasing weapon.

"What d'you mean?" he muttered.

Suddenly she was on her feet facing him, cold, hard, and hating. "How long is this going to last?" She spoke harshly. "Until we're thrown out of here, I suppose, onto the streets of Vienna to starve with the other poor wretches in this ghastly town. D'you really think you've done enough in resisting one hundred pounds worth of temptation?"

"If you're going to begin all over again—" He scowled at her down his long nose.

"Telling you that you ought to be ashamed of yourself?" she took up passionately. "Yes, I am. You haven't a spark of pride in you. You're nothing but a——"

"I'm sick of hearing you complain." He turned his back on her, tramped to the window and stood thrumming on the pane.

Oh, but he'd have to listen. She followed him, clutching at his arm.

"Damn it all, let go of me, Nita."

"What have you done to get us out of this?" Her voice rose shrilly. "The same old thing. Talk—talk—talk. Nothing but talk."

"For God's sake, what d'you want me to *do?*" In the pitiless light you could see how old he'd grown even in the past month.

"What do other people do who have no incomes?" she retorted. "They work. That's what they do."

He plunged past her, pushing her aside. His laugh was bitter to hear. "Work! How? Where? With Vienna on the edge of God knows what, with money not worth the paper it's printed on, with unrest, unemployment everywhere? And you tell me to work. Perhaps," he said, savagely tugging at his moustache, "you're thinking of the Reparations Committee, or what about an English bank? D' you suppose any of my soft-hearted compatriots would give me a job once they looked me up?"

Again that laugh. He trod heavily to the bedroom door. Turned with his hand on the knob. "If it were Paris now or New York, or even one of those bloody malarial islands, I might wangle it. But Vienna—oh, hell!" The door opened. Slammed.

Her legs crumbled under her. She sank into a chair. Dizzy. Sorry for herself. Sorry they couldn't have made a finer show, put up a braver fight.

She huddled there in the chair by the desk. Her mother's last letter lay open on a torn blotter. Her poor mother. Worried to think of them in Vienna. Not understanding why they had left Brassington Hall. From where would she mail her next letter to Stamford? Most likely she wouldn't write. Yes, that might be kinder in the end. Let her mother think her dead.

She glanced up at the touch of a hand on her shoulder. Hal was standing over her dressed in his blue serge. And she still in her sloppy kimono.

"Sorry, old thing," he mumbled.

Through the open door, she could see the bedroom —everything flung about as if a cyclone had struck it. Never occurred to him that she would have to clear up the mess. Her heart hardened. She drew away from his hand.

"Oh, all right." He sounded offended.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going," he said, "to get a shave, and to beg, borrow or steal a drink. Any objections?" With

that he stalked into the hall. Reappeared with his inevitable fedora cocked over a bushy brow. Stick in his hand.

He glowered at her a moment. "If you think it's so easy to get a job," he suddenly blustered from the threshold, "go ahead and try."

So that was his answer. It swept her to her feet. She faced him squarely, head flung back, green eyes bright with scorn.

"I will." Her voice rang clear and final.

He wavered restlessly, swinging his stick. "Don't be a fool, Nita." Then he turned abruptly on his heel, and was gone.

She paced the room with short, nervous steps, a tarnished gold little woman on her mettle.

She would—she would. Shame him. Show him what she could do. Oh, she wasn't down yet. Life hadn't beaten her.

2

Hal would be frantic when he heard. But he had goaded her into it. He had sat back stubbornly, scoffingly, while she trudged the streets of Vienna, peddling her poor little arts and graces. Where hadn't she gone, what hadn't she done that terrible week! Shops, offices, restaurants, dressmaking, hairdressing establishments. She had tried them all. In and out, out of and in strange doors with the eternal gesture of bracing her shoulders, lifting her

head to relax drearily when she found herself again on the street. Hostile streets that seemed to turn their back on her. Faces, distrustful, indifferent, pitying. Voices saying no. And then yesterday——

She had meant to tell Hal in the morning after she had made the final arrangements with the Fischer girl. Now here they were in Mrs. Pratt's salon at the rackety hour of cocktails. And she hadn't told him. She was tempted to call out above the chatter and tinkle of ice—"Hal, I'm engaged from to-night on to entertain clients in a second-rate cabaret. Don't you think I'll be good at it, my dear?"

Spare him that public shock. She could imagine the effect of such an announcement on these solid-jawed, shrewd-eyed Americans on their way home from Russia, from the Balkans. And how they would shudder, those smart birdlike women who fluttered light draperies in the dingy wainscoted room which Mrs. Pratt had sought to enliven with lace cushions, silver frames and a jumble of booty from Viennese shops. She could see their faces curling up like oysters, under a lemon. Could hear them. "What—a cabaret! My *dear!*" All very well to visit such places with one's husband and friends. But for any decent woman to earn her living chatting and dancing with strange men—inconceivable. She quite agreed.

Listen to them. Voices burry and drawly. Fat voices, thin voices.

"What did you get this morning? I got thirty-

one to the dollar. The porter told me—" "And, my dear, the whole suit, stuff and all only came to about five dollars. I must give you his address." "I tell you, sir, we ought to——"

Money—money—the exchange. All they thought about.

She sat near the window, an empty glass at her elbow, a wry little smile painted in on her lips. She felt hidden, defiant in her droopy black hat, her black charmeuse gown. The nauseating smell of Viennese gasolene—an odour of skunk—sifted through the lace curtains. The Fischer girl sat once more beside her. Only yesterday they were strangers. Odd what life did to one. She, Nita, defeated, desperate, she who counted no woman her friend, turning for advice as she had done yesterday, to a stranger. But then there had been something in the girl's expression—a sad wisdom akin to her own. A loneliness.

She shifted her pose to smile at her new friend.

"It's strange, isn't it?" said the girl softly.

Yes, it was strange that they two had met. Strange, she supposed, that Miss Fischer had been led from a sheltered girlhood through the war, through ruin and the death of her father and heart-broken mother, through gallant attempts to find work, down, down to the *Nachtingall,* where nightly she sang and danced. And stranger still that Mrs. Brassington-Welsh should join her there. Oh, it was a droll world.

From across the room, Mrs. Wilbur Pratt rattled her high clear talk at Hal, who, as usual, presided over the improvised bar. Making himself useful, and incidentally making away with an unconscionable quantity of Gordon gin and French vermouth. He could still be hearty enough, with a big frosted shaker in his keeping; could still beam and swagger, with that black cigar someone had given him, tilted from under his unconquered moustache.

"I stuffed a satchel at the bank—such a nuisance their largest bill is only fifty thousand—and took it right over," his hostess was saying. "You never saw such fur. Even if I have to pay duty, it's cheaper——"

Yes, she would always want to get expensive things a little cheaper than they were worth. At home she would employ cheap, clever little dressmakers, cheap little modistes, cheap little jewellers who could copy models.

Hal had reluctantly set down his empty shaker while he waited for more ice. Groups drifted, screening him and his hostess, but Mrs. Pratt's cool, thin tones carried.

"They tell me all the best things were snapped up last winter. I think it's too bad the fuss they make about our buying here. After all, we're bringing in good dollars——"

"I must go," the Fischer girl said, but she made no move.

"Have a cigarette first." There were only three left in her case.

Miss Fischer shook her head, but rose, inconspicuous in her simple tailor suit and small hat, and wove her way over to a box of Abdullahs on the centre table. Calmly she took up the box and returned. "Never smoke your own if you can help it," she said.

Mrs. Pratt's voice sounded again. "I'm absolutely counting on you, Major, to help me find something unusual for my husband. He's so hard to please. I declare I'm at my wit's end. Haven't you a suggestion?"

Hal, once more busy with his shaker, turned. She knew what was in his mind. She seemed to be peering through an open door at the blond young man who shone and tempted.

Mrs. Pratt stood out costly against the dark wainscoting. Platinum and diamonds.

A woman like that deserved——

From across the room she met Hal's look, and felt for a moment alone with him. Framed in her black, she knew herself intensified, betrayed by eye and lip.

Suddenly he tucked in his chin and thrust out his chest. The same noble gesture with which he had faced Wertner.

"I haven't really the foggiest notion what to suggest," he said in a loud voice, and turned back to his shaker.

So that was settled. Her cigarette had burned

out. She laid it down on the silver ash tray beside her empty glass.

Miss Fischer had again risen. "This time I must run. Will you come for me at ten o'clock? You have my address."

Her hand went out. She tried to smile.

"You'll get used to it. Flasheim knows me. He will see that you are not annoyed." The wise grey eyes rested pleasantly upon her.

Hal swaggered forward as, with a nod and a smile, Miss Fischer moved discreetly away among other departing guests. No putting it off any longer. She must tell him. Her throat went dry. The blood throbbed in her cheeks.

"I say, Nita." He stood ruddily planted, an eye cocked at her. "We're stayin' to dine with Mrs. Pratt. She's going to take us to *Sacher's.*"

She felt as if someone were pushing her down a steep hill. "We can't to-night, Hal. We must go right away."

He started to argue. "But look here, old girl, I've promised. Damn it all, I'd like a decent meal once in a while."

"I mean it."

He followed her sulkily, tugging at his moustache. Pulled himself together to play the obedient husband to Mrs. Pratt's voluble reproaches.

"What's the idea?" he grumbled, stalking beside her down the dark stairs, through the stuffy lobby of the old Bristol.

She hurried to the street, silent, unseeing, sick with what she had to do. Bumped into a group of tourists who had stopped to stare across the broad Karntnerring.

Hal grabbed her by the elbow. "Look where you're going," he said crossly.

On the farther side of the Ring beyond the trees, a procession of men was marching without music. She saw them an indistinct mass moving sluggishly. Strikers.

"I'm not very well. Do you mind if we walk a bit?" She spoke with difficulty.

"Feeling seedy?" Hal's voice had changed. He took her arm. He was suddenly strong and dark beside her.

He cared then. She felt little and lost and wandering from the only shelter she knew. What would he do when she told him?

"I'm all right." She tried for the hardness of tone that would turn him from her.

They stood a moment on the corner of Karntner Strasse, and Vienna like a stricken sister seemed to clasp her hand. Once so joyous, so brilliant, so triumphant. And now—cheapened, diminished, the beggar of the world. The long rows of shops stretched meaninglessly. Windows and windows gorged with things whose values were unintelligible.

"For God's sake, Nita!" She had started mechanically to cross toward the Opera. He pulled her back as a motor dashed by.

Now they were alongside the gardens of the huge empty palace, and she hadn't spoken. Hal had let go of her arm. She couldn't have told him while he touched her. But why, after all, should she spare him? She glanced up. He strode ahead, close to the high iron railings of the gardens. His shoulders were hunched forward, his head lowered. He wielded his stick heavily. In the gathering dusk, his long profile seemed to sag, the colour drained from it. His moustache hung forlornly. And this was the man she had travelled with through the long years, the man she had lied for, the man to whom she had cleaved for better or worse.

She drew closer. She opened her mouth to say, "Hal, you've failed me. And now I must do the only thing left for me to do. It's beastly. But it's all I'm good for."

She meant to say it. And other words came. They came from somewhere in ambush where they must have lain hidden and prepared.

She said, "Hal, I'm going to support myself at last. Miss Fischer—you know the girl we met yesterday—has got me a place as night companion to a friend of hers, an old invalid lady."

His expression frightened her as he wheeled about, blocking her way. "When did you decide this?" His face in the dusk was set and stern.

"This morning."

"What's her name? Where does she live?"

The lie worked within her, weaving a pattern.

"You've no right to ask me, Hal." Yes, that was the tone. "It's my job and I won't let you interfere. She doesn't even know I'm married." She waited a moment for him to say something.

He fumbled in his pocket. Took out his cigarette case filled with Mrs. Pratt's Abdullahs. His hand trembled as he lit a match.

"It's better than nothing, Hal," she faltered. "After all, reading and talking English to an old lady who can't sleep, isn't so hard, is it?" Well, at least life with him had taught her to lie. Ah, but in shielding him, wasn't she losing him? It came over her with sickening force. The secret would grow between them, thickening, putting forth creepers, prying them apart. Already she was planning to sneak out her clothes in a valise. Dress at Miss Fischer's.

"As you say, I have no right to stop you, no rights over you." His voice was old and tired.

The pain of it, sharp as a blade, cut through her. She went to him, laid a hand on his arm. They stood so a moment. Her face lifted, shone pale in the shadows. She must have been mad to think she could go through with this thing. Suppose she gave it up? Confessed herself beaten. Suppose she went back—to what? Nothing was changed. No, she had chosen her path. Must follow it now to the bitter end.

"God, I'm low." Hal flung away from her suddenly, striding off into the shadows of the street.

She ran after him, joined him and clutched his arm.

There was nothing more to say. The secret wedged them apart. She clung the closer, trotting to keep up with his stride. And so they turned homeward. And not a stone of the city knew them. Not a stone of the city cared.

3

She waltzed. In the arms of a stranger she was melancholy as tinsel at dawn. It was only midnight. Three hours more under the garish light which showed her up for what she was—a tired, tarnished gold little woman who couldn't play this game.

The Viennese waltz entered into her, haunting and frail. Yes, she was like that, forever aspiring, forever defeated. Her legs ached, her head ached, her lips ached with smiling, her very soul ached. But she waltzed. The violin sang to her—lost—lost—lost, faith lost, and love lost, and hope lost.

Behind her closed eyelids pictures flashed. She saw the dingy apartment, saw herself kneeling beside Hal's old suitcase, staring at money she had found hidden there. A heap of kronen, almost two hundred dollars. Where had he got it?

Her feet moved mechanically among other feet in the hot jumbled mass of rotating bodies; of shoulders, of faces advancing, receding. A confused screen against which she seemed to see Hal, moody,

withdrawn, going his secret way in Vienna. Asking her no question. Telling her nothing. And now this money——

Round and round, up and down the long narrow room lined with cramped boxes, gorged with big fat-necked men who wore rings, dark slippery men with tiny feet, women in large hats and earrings. Pretending to be young and gay and generous. And Hal imagined her safe in the house of a mythical old lady, reading, talking English through the long sleepless nights. Sometimes she thought he hated her for earning her own living. How, otherwise, could he leave her day by day to dangle after Mrs. Wilbur Pratt. Eating, drinking, smoking expensive cigars. Oh, she had seen him riding in Mrs. Pratt's car, seen him sidling in and out of the Bristol, seen him once through the window of a leather shop. Perhaps this money——

And she had stood a week of this to earn a few thousand miserable kronen a night! Enough to buy bread with. She had stood a week of insults, humiliations, a week of Lili Fischer's songs, of Mizzi's crude dances, of Joanna and Max in their tango.

There was Flasheim watching her with his piggish eyes stuck in their rolls of fat. She wasn't playing up. They all knew it, even to the rouged old woman behind the bar, the headwaiter whom she had snubbed, and Zardi, the pock-marked Tzigane, who swayed under the boxes to the rhythm of his waltz.

Must make an effort. She tilted her head to look

up at the stranger. Her smile was like a showy little ornament with the clasps loosened. She wore it a moment under the flushed sticky face of her partner. That particular type of German——

Faster and faster, whirling in a shrieking intense nightmare of crimson and black, of coloured daubs, of violins and bottles——

Out of the mad arabesque, figures, shapes, again took their place. She was left standing alone. The beast to go off like that! Do as other girls did. Follow him to his table. A dab of powder on her nose, a swift touch to her shoulder straps, and now, Nita, sparkle, if you can, with the old radiance.

She had learned to sit uninvited at tables. But the German's stolid eyes stared past her at Lili, who, fresh and cool in her pink flounced dress, was drifting by.

"Kommen Sie hier." And Lili came. One never refused. The waiter brought two glasses.

How did Lili manage? How did she keep remote and cool as a stream flowing through ugly places? A matter of feeling, perhaps. She, Nita, felt herself a weary comedian who without her leading man could give but a sorry performance. Different in the old days, when, with Hal to boom the cue, she had played her clever sparkling part—at least in public.

A little wine would do her good. She lifted her glass; put it down, her hand trembling. Where had she seen that man sitting alone in the corner, drinking beer? Why, it was Wertner. There was no

mistaking that glossy blond head, the set of his shoulders. Fool to be so nervous. She had never met him.

The German, eyeing her, leaned forward to Lili. "Your friend is no good," he said coarsely.

"Don't mind him," Lili said to her in English. But she had risen, her green eyes bright with loathing, her head held high.

The music had started again, a jazz tune. Hugging bodies see-sawed by. Flasheim was watching. She couldn't stand here. Impulse impelled her across the room.

She found herself beside Wertner's table. He was lighting a cigarette. He looked at her, the match burning out slowly. She read in the intense stillness of his pose, in the concentrated stare of his blue eyes, that he knew who she was. And shame ran through her, hot and stinging.

He stood up with a military click of his heels. "*Gnädige Frau*—you here?"

Oh, well, what did it matter! He was no better than the rest, and at least he wouldn't insult her. "You know me then?" She sank into the chair he offered, with a weary droop of shoulders.

"I have seen you often with your husband," he said gravely. "But I——"

Her laugh had the ring of metal. "But you wonder what I'm doing alone at the *Nachtingall.* Obvious enough, isn't it? I'm helping fat men spend their kronen on Hungarian champagne. Will you

order me a sandwich please? I've had no dinner." Under his persistent gaze, she added, "My husband doesn't know, of course. In fact, he thinks I'm doing something quite different." She shrugged her shoulders. "One must live somehow."

"There are other ways of living." His stare deepened, grew significant. He lifted a soft white hand to his moustache.

Suddenly she leaned forward, her elbows on the table, her voice sharpened. "Mr. Wertner, have you done any business with my husband lately?" So this was the nagging question that had driven her to his table.

He met her probing look, slowly feeling in his pocket. He drew out his wallet, drew from it English bills—pounds. The very sight of them as against the paper trash with which the other side of the wallet bulged, held her spell-bound.

"I offered these to your husband two weeks ago in return for a trifling service. He refused."

She watched him slide them back into his wallet, the wallet back into his pocket. He wasn't lying. But then that other money—the money hidden in the suitcase! She stared at the sandwiches the waiter set before her—single round slices of stale bread trimmed with eggs and anchovy. Wertner's polished blue eyes were fixed upon her.

"Your husband has money, *nicht wahr?*" He spoke softly. And he smiled, stroking his short fair moustache.

He was suddenly hateful to her. What right had she to sit here with this man talking over Hal's affairs, giving away his secrets? Her sensitive gesture lifted her half out of her chair.

But he waved her back with a courteous—"*Sie verzeihung, gnädige Frau.* I thought you knew. Your husband told me the other day that he was doing big business here for an American friend of Mrs. Pratt's."

Hal doing business, decent business, honest business? Oh, if she could believe that—if only she could! She drew herself straighter, her hands folding, unfolding in her lap. Think back over the past week—think of his every word, of every look. Real responsibility for once in his life would make him tired, preoccupied, irritable. And yesterday at one of her caustic reproaches, hadn't he retorted, "If it weren't for Mrs. Pratt—" and then suddenly cut himself short.

Oh, she could see it all now, blind and mad that she'd been. He hadn't told her yet because he meant to punish her for her little faith. She had wounded him too deeply.

The music crashing, the cloop of champagne corks, the voices and laughter, reached her from another world. Tears gathered smarting under her eyelids. She would go to him humbly, she would go down on her knees. Beg his pardon. She would tell him—good God, she couldn't tell him! If ever he knew that she had lied to him, cheapened and

abased herself, sold her smile, her graces to strangers —It was so little, so petty, so mean.

Wertner's voice, low and urgent, sounded in her ear. What? She looked up and was turned to stone.

Hal stood in the door at the end of the room. With him was Mrs. Wilbur Pratt and two other people. As in a flash of lightning at night, she saw him outlined, unnaturally tall.

"I should have warned you," Wertner was murmuring. "I ran across them half an hour ago at the *Chapeau Rouge*."

Someone beckoned to her frantically from behind the orchestra. Lili Fischer, yes, of course, she couldn't afford to be found here either.

She sat stricken, a ghastly pale little woman, her red lips stiffened in a smile. She watched the head-waiter lead Hal and his party to a box directly opposite. She watched Hal turn to give an order.

"You can say you came with me." Wertner bent toward her.

Lies—lies—lies. No more of them. Well, the comedy was ended. When Hal saw her——

Count the seconds now. He was leaning over Mrs. Pratt, who glimmered in silver. Zardi, the dark Tzigane, swayed up to the box, his violin raised. Ah, that waltz again——

Hal straightened, glanced across the room.

The tension snapped. She waited as one waits among ruins.

4

He came swiftly, shoving aside the dancing couples. He came fiercely, roughly. A mournful pride lifted her to meet him. She was quiet now, gathered together as if her whole being had rallied to her heart and waited there for a mortal blow.

Then he was upon her, his voice thick with violence, his bloodshot eyes glowering at Wertner.

"What does this mean? What——"

Must save him from scandal. A scene before Mrs. Pratt would be fatal to him.

She had him by the arm. Under her breath she commanded him, "Dance with me. I'll explain." What if he hadn't danced for years? In spite of his leg, he would have to dance now.

"Dance!" He stared at her. "I should say I——"

"You've got to." She slipped his arm about her waist. Strong the feel of it, the touch of him once more. His bewildered bulk still wavered. She pressed him gently, firmly onto the crowded floor.

Major and Mrs. Brassington-Welsh waltzing. A big clumsy man towed by a desperate little woman whose spangles glittered beneath the crude lights, whose face, uplifted, had withered under the powder, whose wide crimson mouth held pitifully her smile. The sad rhythm of the waltz bore them on. Waves that never reached a shore.

"What are you doing here with that scoundrel?" He was hard and unfamiliar. His arm tightened around her.

Better get it over with. Words came in little gasps. "He happened in here to-night and recognised me. That's all. Hal, I lied to you about my job—all I could get—dancing here nights."

"Good God!" His hand in hers went clammy, limp. He blundered through a step. Stopped short. A helpless moment they stood buffeted, jostled by revolving couples. She forced him on—around and around. He moved like a man in a daze. But he hadn't thrown her off.

A blur of faces, of shoulders, swimming in streaked spotted light. A melody borne forward to swoon back. Herself and Hal, dwindled to a speck, turning mindlessly—faster, faster. Vertiginous. Mrs. Pratt's face shone out of the mist. Diamonds and platinum.

Smile, bow.

Her voice sounded thin and far away, telling Hal. "Lost my faith—I'm punished— Oh, Hal, it's been hideous. But why didn't you tell me you had something big at last?" It rose to a wail.

His face was bent close to hers. They moved like a mechanical toy running down.

Their voices intermingled.

"Something big?"

"Didn't you tell Wertner you were putting over a

deal for one of Mrs. Pratt's friends? Hal, I found money in your suitcase. I thought——"

"Yes, I bragged a bit." Their eyes met forlorn, intimate. He drew a deep breath like a sigh. "Nita, I'm that woman's courier. I run her rotten errands for her, I pay her bloody bills. I all but count her wash. And she's leaving next week."

"Oh, Hal!" They turned, knocked about at will of the tune, up and down—down and up.

She lifted her head to smile. All the years in that crooked smile. "Our best," she murmured.

Their best. She in the *Nachtingall,* Hal a courier. "But then the money——"

"Was to pay for a fur laprobe she bought," he told her, stumbling around to the Viennese waltz.

So she had shamed him that day when she told him her lie. She knew what he must have suffered from the men he had approached, his acquaintances at Anna's Bar, and those men at the Bristol whose keen eyes saw through him, saw through his swagger and boasting, saw the sad, battered adventurer, and would have none of him. What it must have cost him to turn to Mrs. Pratt, confess himself penniless, take what she offered. And she had used him, her Major, as she used her cheap little dressmakers, her cheap modistes, her cheap jewellers. And now she was going——

Faster and faster, the music. The violin quivered on a final thin note that hung in the heavy air.

What did anything matter? She and Hal——

The shuffle of dancers returning to their places, the scraping of chairs, the rustle of feet, reached her faintly. They couldn't stand here forever. Flasheim was watching.

Hal gripped her elbow. Where was he taking her? Toward the box where Mrs. Pratt sat, her lorgnette raised.

"Oh, no, not there, Hal."

"Yes, Nita."

Something in his voice, his manner, tore at her heart.

"Come on." He led the way, his shoulders squared, his chest expanded.

She was shaking hands with Mrs. Pratt; with a bald pink young man, a fuzzy brown young woman.

She sat on as in a dream, sipping her wine. Yes, it was quite gay here for Vienna. Not as amusing as Montmartre. Oh, no!

Suddenly behind her, Hal's voice sounded with the round full note. "Very old friend of mine. Just the man I wanted you to meet. I hoped Nita could get hold of him to-night."

Still in her dream, she saw Wertner clicking his heels together, bowing. He shone and tempted.

Hal bent forward to whisper in Mrs. Pratt's ear, who turned, her features sharpened, her eyes bright and greedy. "Oh, how do you do, Mr. Wertner. The Major tells me you know of something too wonderful I can—oh, but it's a secret, isn't it?"

Hal's voice again. "Nita's a bit tired. You don't mind our slipping off?" His hand on her shoulder linked them forever and ever.

Her little smile carried her out of the box. Hal towered above her. She looked up and their eyes met. Then she followed him slowly as he swaggered on ahead.

CHAPTER VII

GLAMOUR

I

THERE was no going back. Hawkes had been right when he told her that morning in Brassington Hall that habits once formed were not easily broken. Moral muscles grew flabby, he had said,—flabby from lack of exercise. Yes, he was right. Once Hal had accepted Wertner's money and she had allowed him to accept it, they had tacitly confessed themselves down and out. Weaklings. But what else could they have done? What else could there ever be for Major and Mrs. Brassington-Welsh? That was the bitter, bitter question.

The worst of it was, she didn't care so very much —at first. How unmorally sweet had been the sense of escape from everything she dreaded, everything she loathed! Feeling that you could afford things again. Feeling Hal beside her more lover-like than he had been for many a year; Hal talking of second honeymoons and romance and Venice as the perfect setting. Just those English pounds made the difference. Money.

Passionately she had given herself over to the

enjoyment of the fleeting moment. Drift for a while and be happy. Why not? Venice, water, gondolas —the Venice of her girl-dreams. Here it was. Here was Venice; here she was in Venice, not daring to think of the past; not caring to think of the morrow.

She might have known it couldn't last.

She was very angry and worried to-night. She lay back in the gondola, a little woman in black with too much powder on her cheeks, too much red on her lips and too much bitterness in her heart.

Her companion sat bolt upright beside her, chewing on his cigar. He was a small, bony man with a rummaging eye that he had ably used during the evening. His present silence meant several things, all of them wearisomely familiar, and all of them to be summed up in a significant word—trouble. She had been sure of that ever since, in the mellow after-glow of coffee and liqueurs, Hal had shown off the Fabbia necklace, and with it his own impaired powers of invention. Why couldn't he have told the truth; told how he came to have such a valuable thing to sell, and to whom it really belonged? Or, if the Contessa so insisted on discretion, why couldn't he have lied convincingly?

Mr. Gale had not believed a story more intricate than the filigree carvings of the old-gold setting. She had observed the startled intensity of his gaze as he examined the jewels.

He recognised them! And then he had caught her watching him. He was watching her now. She

knew that as she knew too many things in this sad world.

Hal, of course, realized none of this. He had sauntered up to her in the hall of the Hotel Danieli and bent to whisper, "You'll manage the old bird now, won't you, Nita? There's a dear girl." Whereupon, fatuously remarking aloud that the Contessa Fabbia was waiting for him, he had swaggered on ahead, leaving her to trail behind with William P. Gale. By the time she and Mr. Gale reached the Quays the Fabbia gondola had melted into the Venetian atmosphere. Of all abominable insolence, carrying Hal off like that, without a word to her!

Well, she was in no mood to be a dear girl. And if she managed anything, it would be to find out why this fascinating red-haired widow chose, in her mother-in-law's absence, to entrust to such a man as Hal a ruby-and-diamond heirloom worth a fortune. Interesting to know what the old Marchesa Fabbia would think of Major Brassington-Welsh handling an ornament that for centuries past had adorned the proud necks of great Venetian ladies. She could see the rubies now as they had scornfully flashed their wise old fires in Hal's congested face, among the subdued gilt furnishings and mirrors of their *salon* in the Hotel Danieli; could hear the showman's tone in Hal's voice, and feel again the odd excitement in Mr. Gale's manner.

"Know the Contessa for long?" Mr. Gale ad-

dressed her for the first time since their imposed *tête-à-tête*.

"Only for a little while."

She tried to speak quietly. From the lesser distinction of the hired gondola, she could at last dimly make out the Fabbia gondola gliding along in the moonlight, fantastic, fairylike in this languorous world of stars and water, of whisperings, of lanterns, of tenor voices. She imagined the glow of Hal's cigar, his heavy lounging figure, and the sinuous line of the Contessa reclining beside him in pale draperies. Having one of their business talks, no doubt, in which Major Brassington-Welsh felt himself lifted into the faded splendours of Venetian society; saw himself selling for "fat commissions" the treasures of high-sounding names.

"Know anything about her?" Mr. Gale casually questioned. But there was nothing casual in the deliberate movement with which he struck a match for his cigar and held it so that he could peer into her face.

"Do you?" she parried. Heigho, but she was tired of distrusting and being distrusted! So tired of those rusty little bells that rang ever fainter the alarm within, as if the nerves that set them off were weary of their job.

"Oh, I've heard a few things." Mr. Gale shifted his pose to gaze at San Giorgio Maggiore couched against the stars. "Kind of woman men fall for, isn't she?"

"Fall in trouble—yes," slipped from her. Sorry she had said that. "She's very lovely."

She tilted her head against the leather cushion, wearing her little smile like a knot of red ribbon to hide shabby spots.

Through half-closed eyes, she could follow now the slender silhouette of the Fabbia gondola, the rhythmic sway of the Fabbia gondoliers; ghostly figures bending to and fro.

But Mr. Gale had not done with her.

"Beautiful necklace your husband has got hold of. I know something about jewels. Whom did he say it belonged to?" His small, keen eyes sounded and probed.

"Mr. Gale, do you know the Marchesa Fabbia?" She asked it abruptly. His expression altered ever so slightly. Her guess was right then. She pressed her advantage. "I think you do."

She was smiling, an innocent little woman in black. Venice around her.

"I'd like to hear what else you think."

He leaned closer, his cigar loosely held between short, bony fingers. She let him wait while she fumbled in her bag for a cigarette. Then slowly: "I think, Mr. Gale," she said, "that you have seen that necklace before."

He appeared to be flavouring his cigar before dryly remarking, "You're a very bright young woman. Let us suppose that I have. What then?"

She had perhaps gone too far; certainly far

enough to have cast a perceptible shadow on the whole transaction. Well, the shadow was, and had been there, from the beginning, and if Hal had listened to her——

She stared out at the swimming loveliness of the night. They were drawing closer to the lantern-hung barge of the Serenata. Italian songs drifted. Her heart was filled with the pain of yearning and she couldn't for the moment answer. What was Venice to her but a city of bridges, pigeons, crumbling old apricot fronts and Byzantine domes? Her store room of memory was littered with such junk—painted scenery, cracked and peeling. She thought of Vienna and shuddered.

"What then?" Mr. Gale called her back.

She was goaded on to answer: "Why then, knowing whom it really does belong to, you either want to buy it without too many unpleasant questions or —" She turned to face him. "I don't see why I shouldn't tell you," she said defiantly.. "The Contessa Fabbia asked Hal to sell that necklace without mentioning any names. So he made up that absurd story about a starving prince. I'm telling you this because I want you to understand that he's in no way responsible——"

Hal would be furious with her.

"Very clever," murmured Mr. Gale as if he appreciated a performance given for his benefit.

She floundered on, miserably aware of a blunder. She wished now that she had held her tongue.

"You knew it! You gave yourself away this evening when you saw that necklace. It's only fair to Hal——"

Gale nodded.

"So I gave myself away, did I? What eyes you have, Mrs. Brassington-Welsh! Well, well!" Smiling, he puffed at his cigar.

Only a few more moments now before they reached the Serenata barge. In the clear soft light she could see the Fabbia gondola nozzling in among the others, a black brood circling the troup of musicians in the larger boat. Above the long black-and-gold stuffs trailing over the deep dreamy seat, she saw Hal's dark head and the rich glow of the Contessa's hair.

"Mr. Gale, please forget what I told you." But he wasn't the forgetting kind.

The gentle urge of the gondolier's long, slender oar pushed them forward. Click of silvery prows and rubbing of gondolas intimate, glamorous. Strangers who looked like melted sticks of candy, red and white, spilled all sticky and smeary under the moon. Hal's voice drowning the song of an olive-skinned boy.

"O sole mio—" The boy stood, his head flung back, singing.

Poor, sad, little woman with the years showing under her powder, and her man not beside her.

"I say, you two! Thought you were never coming on."

It would take more than a few fluttery mandolins and a Neapolitan song to keep Hal quiet. He leaned forward, all shirt front and moustache, preening himself among carved dolphins and the Fabbia arms. His face shone a red and jolly contrast to the Contessa, who lolled beside him like a long, uncurled feather, too languid to stir.

"Where have you been, *carina?*" she murmured.

"Oh, we browsed along," drawled Mr. Gale; but the look he gave her did not go with a drawl.

"All right, old dear?" Hal craned his head around, wagging and beaming. That jovial mood wouldn't last for long if he knew what she had done. Her heart sank within her as she imaged him stamping about, flushed and swollen, roaring at her, "What the devil d'you mean, Nita, meddling——"

Yes, she had meddled and would meddle again. Why did that woman need to take up with an old battered creature like Hal! No good in it.

"Rippin'!" Hal proclaimed, graciously bowing to the musicians; and his hand moved up to his moustache as the Contessa begged him in that soft, slurred voice of hers for a match. Obvious device, that—a cigarette, a match, a whisper.

Pagliacci.

What did anything matter? She lay back, her little smile moored to her lips. You knocked about and grew old and nobody cared. Sheen of water, plash and click. Twang of strings, limp, mooning

strangers. The colour painted by lantern and star gave them all for a while the sense of being disguised. Forgotten, hotel bills, postal cards, the exchange, Baedekers. In a sweet syrup of illusion, they swam together, unaware of the acrid taste of this stuff of Venice; unaware that beneath the smooth watered surface the nerves of the past dangerously tingled. But it was there, that slumbering violence of ages gone by.

"How about it, Gale, old man?"

Hal's gesture offered up romance much as he had shown off the necklace.

"Oh, I'm looking around."

And Mr. Gale proved that he could do just that. Under his cool stare the Contessa stirred as if the late August air were yet too chilly for summery stuffs and white furs.

"If you don't mind, Major—I am tired." And she sent one of those frail, bright glances in the direction of the men. But the brightness she fixed on Gale was a trifle more intense, more like the flash of a weapon.

"Right-o!" Hal was gallantly at her orders. He remembered in time. "I say, Nita, why don't you and Gale trot along after us? Jolly ride up the canal."

Trot along after them, indeed!

"Not a bad idea!" Her green eyes were frosty.

To a tarantella thrummed on mandolins the Fabbia gondoliers were already pulling out. The

Contessa fluttered a languid farewell with her long, tapering fingers. Hal's face, red and black, grinned a moment in the lantern glow. He twisted about to wave and shout, "See you later!"

And now the illumination of the barge grew dimmer, music floated. They slid past the lighted fronts of hotels into sleek shadows. Smell of fish, of rotten eggs on the ebbing tide. She felt emptied of anger, weary of it all. Came the hoarse, lugubrious cry of a gondolier sweeping around a dark corner.

"I think if you'll excuse me I'll go back to the hotel." She sounded her dreariness.

"Just a moment." Mr. Gale lit another cigar, taking his time. "Are you going to tell your husband of our little talk?"

"I suppose so." She wished he hadn't reminded her of it.

"You must not tell him, Mrs. Brassington-Welsh."

There was a note of command in his voice. It drew her up, her head held high, thin nostrils quivering.

"I shall do as I think best, Mr. Gale."

He softened his tone.

"Look here, I'll be frank with you."

She turned away to gaze up at the spectral arches and pillars of old façades. Perhaps it would be wiser to listen.

"Look here," he said again. His small hard body seemed charged with sudden energy. "This Coun-

tess, now—she's no friend of yours." He was watching her closely. "Suppose I give you a bit of her history—if you don't know it already."

It was as if he played a cold little searchlight on her.

"Go on," she consented, and settled deeper in the black cushions.

"She's an American. You wouldn't think it, but they get that way sometimes. She married the Fabbia boy several months before he was killed in the war. His family refused to recognise her, until about a year ago. She's a persistent young woman." Persistence, apparently, was a quality he grudgingly admired. "But they're not satisfied. Understand? Now she and that husband of yours—I'm not saying anything against him, but——"

"You'd better not!" She spoke up harshly. In the moonlight her face was whiter for the red of her lips.

"Seems to me"—Mr. Gale squinted at the stars—"seems to me I've heard of Major Brassington-Welsh."

Trying to frighten her!

"What if you have?"

She faced him, an aroused, blonde little woman, ready to fight for her man.

"Wait a moment! Wait a moment!"

With a brusque movement he turned and spoke to the gondolier. And now their gondola lay like a long, black fish in the shadows of a mouldy wall.

"I want to go back to the hotel."

She was very angry; and she was frightened, as he had meant her to be.

Opposite them, on the canal, the Fabbia gondola glided up to the old stone steps of the Fabbia Palazzo.

"See that?" Gale pointed.

It was as if the Contessa had set her stage for a tableau, which she immediately presented as wrought-iron doors opened into a dim vista of marble and stone statues. She stood poised a moment beside Hal's ponderous bulk. Then she was framed in the doorway. With her red hair glowing and that long willowy effect of light chiffons, she looked seductive enough to turn any man's head. Hal lingered. Probably he thought himself a most gallant and killing creature, standing there bareheaded on the steps of an old crumbly palace flirting with a countess.

"Pity that her mother-in-law happens to be at the Grand Hotel in Rome," Mr. Gale slowly observed.

Hal had never before looked at another woman. He had never before— It turned her fierce and wild.

"Why do you do this to me? How do you know all these things?"

"I know a great many things." There was an ominous inflection to Mr. Gale's voice.

From the shadows where their gondola gently rocked, she stared across at those two figures outlined now in the great doorway. Why had Gale

brought her here to suffer? Mechanically her mind worked, fitting, piecing significant bits together. Hadn't Gale sought Hal's acquaintance in the bar of the Hotel Danieli? Hadn't Gale asked to be introduced to the Contessa? Yes, and Gale had led Hal on, she remembered; had encouraged his boasting; had adroitly questioned and pried. It wasn't hard these days to lead Hal on. And then tonight——

She had it. An American with the technique of a lawyer, a man familiar with the Fabbia affairs. Clear enough. If the Marchesa Fabbia wished to investigate the private life of an undesirable daughter-in-law she would never go to an Italian. Contemptible!

"You were sent here," she attacked him. "You were sent here to spy on her. You found her playing around with us. You sized us up. And then Hal showed you the necklace. You knew it wasn't for sale."

This Gale man had gone about things in a beastly way. After all, life was hard on women.

"I told you that you were clever." Mr. Gale, unmoved, stared at the stub of his cigar, then turned to gaze across the shimmery water at the prolonged adieus of the two in the doorway. "Now, you're gonig to be sensible, Mrs. Brassington-Welsh." His voice was crisp and cold again. "I don't want to get you into trouble, but I can't afford to be interfered with. So what about our working together,

you and me? If your husband is straight it won't do him any harm——"

"He is straight," she gave back at him; but in the hollow corridors of her heart the words echoed forlornly.

"All right," Mr. Gale conceded. "You say so. Well then, what about giving him a little lesson? He's infatuated with this woman. You want him cured, don't you? Now look here!" He bent forward to lay a hand on her arm, unimpressed by her swift withdrawal. "You keep quiet about our talk to-night and let the sale of the necklace go through. We'll prove to your husband that he's been used, d'you understand?—used by this woman. No fuss, no scandal. We don't want that any more than you do. What about it?"

In the dimly-lit picture across the canal she saw Hal bend at last to kiss the Contessa's hand. Intolerable, the thought of his droopy moustache touching that long, tapering hand, his eyes growing more bloodshot, his face redder. And this might go on——

Her lips were dry under the rouge.

"I've always played square with Hal, Mr. Gale."

Had she? There were times when for his own good she had lied.

"Better listen to me," the little man said bluntly. It sounded like a threat.

Hal turned, was peering over the star-flecked

water; perhaps wondering where she and Gale were. Rather late to wonder that.

The Contessa had melted into the chill old hall, the massive iron doors closed.

She felt desperate. "I must think it over."

The Fabbia gondola, a slender, elegant silhouette, was moving off, Hal lounging in it.

"*Avanti!*" Gale ordered, and their gondola slipped into the track of the other. "I'll give you until tomorrow afternoon. Say nothing until then." His manner was brusque.

Hal needed a lesson. Besides, he wouldn't believe her if she told him. He would fly into one of his dreadful tempers. Her spirit felt crushed as by hands of steel.

"I'll have to think it over," she faltered. He took it as a promise.

They stole up to the Fabbia gondola and Hal didn't even see them. He was leaning back, off his guard. All the boom and bluster even to his full rich colour had ebbed, leaving him dark and empty. In repose his face sagged. He looked heavy and old.

"Hal!" She leaned out of the gondola to call.

Pitiful the way he pulled himself together, forcing the old hearty note:

"Oh, hello—hello! Where did you come from?"

"We've been cruising around," Gale quietly answered.

Hal sat up straighter; his hand swept out in a large circular gesture.

"Nothing like it in the world," he rumbled. "Nothing like it. My friend, Count Brunelli—ever meet him?—was telling me the other day—" His voice went on filling the night with the noise of boasting.

A vast mournful sense of loss held her still, her small arts and graces fallen from her like useless ornaments. Song came over the water. The Quays lay creamy and white, the domes seemed to have dwindled in the night. The Lido, like an unclasped necklace in a dark velvet box, gleamed distantly.

She closed her eyes. Ah, if she were only younger.

2

The Lido. Sun and the bathing hour. And Mrs. Brassington-Welsh, who had come here after a sleepless night to do the decent thing. A debatable problem, the decent thing. Depended on how you looked at it. She looked at it with the bitter green eyes of one who has wandered through perilous years, harried and hounded. There was the trapper and the trapped. Gale was the trapper. After all, she hadn't promised him anything definite, and it was a mean game he wanted her to play.

There were other cleaner games she had thought of during the endless night. She meant to try one and then another. If the first didn't succeed, well,

she would turn—not to Gale, nor even to Hal. But surely a cautious warning would drive the Contessa away, and Hal would have his lesson just the same. Yet she had not spoken. The words would not come.

Nothing but malice had made the Contessa so friendly this morning; the malice of knowing herself daring and beautiful after her bath as she rested on a couch under the gay awning of her cabin. Flaunting herself there in her flowered rose-silk pyjamas, high-heeled satin slippers on her stockingless feet, a rose ribbon binding her red hair. Outrageous the way these women got themselves up after their baths.

Hard to be fair; hard to be generous. She sat on a pliable folding chair, wishing she hadn't come, wishing that at least she had worn a veil to hide the flush of her cheeks, the sallow markings under her eyes. Among all the bright moving colours, sleek fashion disporting itself against an intense blue of sea and sky, an intense gold of sand, she felt herself rusty in black; not even a parasol.

"Why do you dislike me, *carina?*"

The Contessa languidly turned to lean on an elbow. She was like a piece of vivid silk in which lurked the slender point of a needle, ready to prick.

"I don't dislike you." No, she hated her.

The Contessa laughed.

"Ah, but you do, *Che peccato!* I find you so interesting. You look as if you had—lived."

Let her laugh and mock. A word and the fun would be on the other side. Would it? You never knew with a woman like that. Give her no satisfaction.

"I have no illusions, if that's what you mean."

The Contessa laughed again, sinking back among her cushions, the flowered rose silk of her pyjamas undulating as she lifted her slim body.

"How delightful to have no illusions! It lightens one's luggage so." And she dipped into her platinum cigarette case with its coronet of diamonds. Her thin scarlet lips daintily took hold of a Russian cigarette. "I beg your pardon. Do have one. A friend of mine keeps me supplied."

"No, thank you."

Her formal manner, she knew, ill accorded with hot cheeks, and hating eyes. What was she waiting for? She hadn't come here to be made a fool of, to expose herself in this pitiless morning light to the amused inspection of an enemy. But the fight was not in the open, and there was always the chance that the single blow she had to deal would not put to flight this insolent, audacious woman. Then, what——

The Contessa, cool and flower-skinned, blew little pale rings of smoke into the bright air and gossiped between puffs, as if for the rest of her life she had nothing to do but to lie there consuming Russian cigarettes and demolishing reputations.

You couldn't listen to her without a sense of help-

lessness, as exquisitely she punctured the complacent surface of the people scattered over the beach, penetrating to their intimate envies, their greeds, their loves.

Dancers, duchesses, wealthy Americans, young girls, attached and unattached men—she knew them all enough to draw a single drop of acid poison from each.

This couldn't go on. Either say what she had come to say or——

But the Contessa, having finished with cigarette and scandal raised herself on an elbow and sweetly —too sweetly—inquired, "Where is the Major? I shall have to scold him for not turning up."

Careful now! No time and place to lose her temper. Surely the hard years had taught her control, had taught that wide red mouth its gallant ways. "I believe he went out with Mr. Gale."

"Where have they gone?" The Contessa's voice had lost its sweetish quality.

It would have been delicious to refuse satisfaction, but the truth, now she thought of it, might prove even more disquieting.

"Oh, I thought you knew! Mr. Gale wanted an expert to see the necklace. He happened to hear of an American stopping at the same hotel. So he and Hal——"

But the Contessa, with a surprising energy, had swung about on her couch and sat on the edge, her eyes the purple of storm clouds, her face very white

against the glittering red of her hair and the deep-flowered rose of her costume.

"Why didn't he consult me? I distinctly told him not to show the necklace to anyone—not to anyone except the purchaser."

Speaking of tempers! If Hal could see his lovely lady now!

"My husband isn't your servant, Madame."

Suddenly passion filled her, straining to break out. What right had any woman to use this tone about Hal? The Contessa's thin scarlet lips made a straight cruel line not pleasant to see.

"Your husband," she said, lowering her voice as a gay group drifted to the adjoining cabin—"your husband is a stupid, bungling idiot. I should have known better than to have anything to do with a man of his type."

"What about his having anything to do with you?"

There was a rushing in her head, in her ears. The air quivered with a thousand reflections as of blades whirling. Stretches of sand, and glare of blue, and hot red hair between her and the sea.

"Hal-loo! Thought we'd find you here!"

Hal suddenly blazed upon them like a red-and-white electric sign. In the splendour of his white flannels and a complexion that had nothing to do with the sun, he twinkled a moment, comfortably unaware that anything in this jolly old world could go wrong. Whiskies at Florian's, of course.

With a swift, suspicious glance at Gale, who, in loose home-spun, hovered in the background, wiping his forehead with a silk handkerchief, the Contessa rose from her couch and looked around as if hunting for a bell that would summon a footman to conduct them all from her house.

"Hal dear, the Contessa has an engagement. We mustn't keep her."

If Hal had had any sense left he would have seen by the suffused crimson of her cheeks, the glitter of her green eyes, a betrayal of a passion that was still shaking her. He should have heard by the very vibrations of her voice. But he didn't.

"Oh, come now, Nita; we can have a little drink together first," said he, cocking a bloodshot eye at small tables that were being set for luncheon in front of the cabins. And with an arch wag of his head in the Contessa's direction, he adjusted the rakish angle of his grey fedora. "I say, you know, we need a drink. Been doing big business this morning, haven't we, Gale?"

At this jovial hint, Gale slowly came forward. You could tell that he, at least, was missing nothing.

"We're not wanted, Hal." She said it rudely.

"What d'you mean?"

It had at last dawned on him that something was wrong. He stared from her to his Contessa, who, as disdainful as anyone could be in rose-silk pyjamas, frigidly answered. "I prefer not to discuss it. I really can't have another scene here."

Another scene, indeed! Those small rummaging eyes of Gale's were fixed upon her. She took Hal's arm.

"Come, Hal! Come!"

But you couldn't budge him. He stood there getting redder and redder, tugging at his moustache, and suddenly, furiously, he turned on her—on her, Nita.

"Look here, Nita, what the devil have you been up to? If you've said anything——"

People staring, Gale watching, and that woman, with a beastly little smile, sinking down among her cushions, as if the whole affair bored her, and she couldn't help it if vulgar, loud nobodies, intruded on her privacy.

"Ask your friend what she said about you, Hal," she flung at him; and with her head held high, she marched off past the light, chattering groups, the hurrying waiters.

If Hal came after her she would tell him everything. If he didn't— She slowed her pace, giving him time.

He wasn't coming. All right then. Act quickly while the impulse was upon her, while the raw wound smarted and ached.

Up the wide steps of the terrace she went, into the big Turkish hall of the hotel, where, in a few hours, a jazz band would crash to the tinkle of teacups.

She went with short, swift, little steps to the desk.

Hard to write with her hand shaking so. What was the hotel in Rome where the Marchesa Fabbia was stopping? Gale had mentioned it. She crumbled and threw away two telegraph blanks before her message was even legible.

There, it was done! Panic gripped her, held her motionless, leaning against one of the white columns of the hall, staring at the flock of small tables, the wicker furniture.

Gay, careless people drifted by with idle movements of shoulders and arms. She couldn't stay here forever. She moved slowly out onto the wide terrace again, down the steps, looking neither to right nor to left.

3

She went toward the sea, moving mechanically, a little woman whose black toque and voile gown struck an intense note in the sunlight. Sand in her patent leather slippers, fine particles that grated against the soles of her feet.

Sit down a moment here in this warm gold with nothing around but the clean blue of sky, the fine wavering line of sea against the beach. A child in red playing over there; a slim young woman strolling beside a man.

Lonely. She was lonely! Longed to sail away over the shining water to some strong, homely haven where there were simple people and unadorned decencies.

"I've been looking for you."

At the sound of a voice she started. Oh, dear, it was Gale! She lifted her head to lower it again with a movement of impatience. Her foot had gone to sleep. The ribs of her corsets pressed into her side.

"Please, I want to be alone." She would never dare tell him—never.

He sat himself down beside her with a stiff, unaccustomed arrangement of legs.

"Young lady, I'm going to give you a bit of advice." Deliberately he paused to weigh and sift sand, letting it ooze between his short bony fingers as from an hourglass.

"Want to hear it?" He meant to be friendly.

She didn't answer. What was the use?

"Here it is, anyway," he said: "Go home!"

Home! Oh, that was funny—funnier than he realised: her little laugh told him as much.

"Home? Where is that, Mr. Gale?"

"Well, America is a mighty good place for Americans."

He took out his silk handkerchief, incongruously bright against his homespun suit, and mopped his face.

Home! The wooden house in Stamford! Her poor mother to whom she hadn't even written for weeks. Home! Her old dream of Brassington Hall forever dispelled. Home! Hotel bedrooms, boats, trains——

"See here," he summoned her back. She watched his small, stiff figure as he bent to scoop up more sand. "It isn't right for a girl like you to be mixed up in——" And there he stopped with a queer snapping to of his lips.

Amusing, the men who had said about that same thing to her. Rather late for a girl like her to avoid being mixed up in more unsavoury affairs than Mr. Gale ever could guess. Wearily she shifted her position; the numbed nerves of her foot tingled.

Mr. Gale left off playing with sand and spoke bluntly: "I want you to persuade your husband to give back that necklace by to-morrow morning—to the Countess. And—" he leaned forward with a sudden tenseness of body—"the quicker you leave Venice the better for you."

She wasn't surprised. He had only followed her own train of thought; but he had caught up with her too late. If he knew that she had been about to betray his confidence that very morning; if he knew that, failing in her first move, she had undertaken a far more serious one on her own responsibility, what would he say?

"Why do you tell me this now?"

She looked at him steadily. There was an expression on his small, tight face that was new to her. After all, even such a man had his human moments.

"Why do I tell you?" He seemed to be asking it of himself before abruptly admitting, "I'm sure I don't know."

"Well, Hal won't back out."

For no definite reason she sounded a note of defiance.

"Sure of that?"

Mr. Gale shot it at her as if she were on a witness stand. And whatever was left in him of human flowering dwindled to a very thin bloom. She nodded. Had she spoken then she would have said too much—things that were not for him to hear, things that lay between herself and Hal.

He gave a little grunt and sat frowning down at the sand as if his thoughts were neither kind nor pleasant.

She felt suddenly not only that she had lost him, but that she feared him more than ever. The fierce glare of noonday burned in her eyes. Her black voile clung wilting to neck and arms.

"Mr. Gale, you don't trust Hal." Stupid of her to challenge him this way.

With an awkward lift of his small, stiff body, he scrambled to his feet. There was—his manner clearly expressed,—no more to be said. She rose slowly after him, shaking the sand from her skirt. Glad now she hadn't told him about the telegram.

"What are you going to do?" She asked it more as an adversary than as a fellow conspirator.

He looked away as if for once he didn't choose to meet her eye.

"I told your husband I had cabled for the money, and that it should arrive some time to-morrow."

She drew a step nearer.

"So you're going through with it?"

His turn to nod. But as, with a shrug and a gesture that he might take as he pleased, she started off across the blinding beach, he overtook her.

"One more bit of advice, Mrs. Brassington-Welsh." His voice was stern. "You're going through with it too—now. You remarked a moment ago that I didn't trust your husband. I shall trust him still less if you or he interfere with my plans. And I shall know——"

If he knew anything he should have known her better than to threaten.

"Why should I interfere, Mr. Gale?"

She thought of her telegram, and her smile was a little red shield hiding her secret.

So they walked on in silence. Wasn't that—yes, it was Hal tramping toward them. If only he was in the right mood; if only he would come to her again—her Hal, her own Hal—she would tell him everything.

He wasn't in the right mood. He had a grievance. The hunch of his shoulders, the droop of his head, even his moustache proclaimed it. Mr. Gale watched his heavy approach.

"I think your husband wants to talk to you alone," he murmured, and lifting his hat strolled off.

Hal stood scowling down at her. The reflected glare of yellow sand showed up the puffiness under his eyes, the grey about his temples.

"I wish you wouldn't meddle in my affairs," he said at last savagely. "I've had the devil of a time with the Countess."

Her heart closed against him.

"You look it." And she turned from him to walk on. He stalked after her, hands jammed in his pockets.

"Here I had everythin' going—no trouble, no questions—and you come along and blab a lot of things that were none of your business."

She plodded on without a word.

"Nita!" His voice was fretful.

Sun and sand, sand and sun. The row of cabins looming up in a blur of colour and movement.

"Why don't you answer?" He was swelling up for another explosion. "If it's only for my sake, you might try to be decent when I'm doin' everything——"

She halted a moment to look at him. Yes, he was doing everything—everything a man could do. He knew well enough what he was doing. He shifted from one foot to another under her steady gaze. His hand went uncertainly to his moustache.

"You needn't glare at me like that. I've had trouble enough," he muttered.

"And likely to have more," she grimly predicted.

But he wasn't listening to her.

"Small thanks to you that I've managed to hold on," he grumbled. "She wanted to throw the whole

thing over. Got a crazy idea in her head that she's seen Gale somewhere before, and she don't like him. She's mad at me too, about this morning."

He waited in vain for this alarming news to make an impression.

"Well?" She didn't sound encouraging.

"Well," he returned with a faint rounding out of his importance, "I explained everything. That expert fellow don't count. Friend of Gale's. I swore on my honour that Gale was all right. Why, he's cabled——"

What was the use of talking to him, of arguing? He had better find out, better learn his lesson.

"I don't want to hear any more, Hal."

"But confound it all, Nita——"

Wearily she shook her head.

"I can't stand this heat. I must get back to the Danieli where I can lie down."

"But look here, Nita, she's invited us to a party to-morrow night. Promised we'd go. I do think it's the least you can do." He tried to bluster.

"We'll see to-morrow." Hot, stabbing pains in her eyes, in her head. "Coming?" She didn't care whether he came with her or not.

He hung back a moment. The Contessa was nowhere in sight.

"I thought we'd lunch here. But—oh, hang it all, I'll trot along." With a remnant of his swagger, he followed her.

4

She stood alone in the large open window of the *salon* on the top floor of the Palazzo Fabbia. No one noticed her. Her little smile was gallant as a red pennant still flying over a foundering ship—a small ship that has sailed through pitiless seas. Venice stole in through the window; Venice of intrigue and carnival, of masked foreign faces; Venice blended with the painted rafters, the old gilt and glass of the softly lit room.

She never would have come to the Contessa's party had not Hal jubilantly informed her at the last moment that Gale's money having arrived he meant to buy the necklace that very evening. Why this evening? Ever since yesterday's talk at the Lido, Mr. Gale had avoided her. She didn't trust him, and there had been no answer from Rome to her telegram.

She should have warned Hal before leaving the hotel. No matter how deeply he had wounded her, she should have warned him against Gale. Her fears, obscure, intangible, increased with every moment she stood by the window and watched him strut among the Contessa's guests, advertising himself as host. The necklace in its oblong faded red box was actually in his pocket. It seemed as if the jewels must blaze through the stuff of his coat and magically fly to the slim painted throat of a great Fabbia lady on the wall.

Had Gale arrived? Yes, there he was in the hall, talking to another man, unmistakably American.

Evidently his business could wait until later in the evening when the hostess could better be spared; and rotten business it was, however you looked at it!

With her back to him, the Contessa stood framed in the doorway, Hal ruddily beside her. Any woman who called herself dressed for the evening in a few yards of light green chiffon and rhinestone shoulder straps deserved to be disgraced.

At sight of them so close together, passion tightened in her as for a spring. It wouldn't take much—not very much—to turn Nita Brassington-Welsh into a primitive creature ready to fight for her mate. The taste of salt in her mouth, the feel of blood pounding— She must stop this.

The evening's entertainment had begun. A young man, all arms and eyes, drew out from his violin a weird melody that grated on the nerves. Exotic faces, bare shoulders, stuffs, jewels, pale shirt fronts gleamed from the shadows. She felt caught as in the disquieting atmosphere of an aquarium where flowered strange, cruel plants.

Better not look at them. She leaned out of the window. Dark, dreamy water and stars like a field of narcissus, cool, fragrant. Nothing for her anywhere. How they had sunk and sunk! Yet since there was no going back ever to youth and security, let them at least keep to their own cheap world, pick up what scraps they could in the beaten track of

hotels and cafés, where a swagger, a drink and a cigar still imposed; where she could still help along with the trained curl of her wide red mouth. They were too old and coarsened to maneuvre in this rarefied air of titles and jewels.

A gondola stole softly alongside the crumbling stone steps of the palazzo. She gazed down, leaning far out of the window. There was luggage in the gondola, and a tall veiled figure that rose and stared up at the windows.

The Marchesa Fabbia, answering in person the telegram! Her heart ran faster, faster, like footsteps of one fleeing in the night. Panic fastened upon her. Now they were in for it. She drew back from the window, steadying herself, a hand on the yellow brocaded curtain.

A last wailing note floated from the violin. A thin patter of applause. People drifted from couches and chairs, scattered in the hall, in the adjoining dining room. Not a moment to lose. She brushed rudely past groups, a flushed little woman in black crêpe-de-chine, whose eyes and lips were her only jewels. Bumped into a woman with a great mass of short white hair like a wilting chrysanthemum, a woman in a tailor suit with the Legion of Honour, a wicked old woman in wig and diamonds.

She must find Hal. He was not in the library, where couples, slim and elegant, whispered in painted alcoves. Nor was he in the dining-room, with its coloured Venetian lustres and mellow old portraits.

But there was the Contessa at the far end near the buffet. Ah, and there was Gale and his friend standing whispering in a corner. Odd that Major Brassington-Welsh should not be here, holding forth beside the punch bowl!

Only one more doorway, curtained with tapestry.

In the dim light of a lamp, she made him out against the rose walls of the small room. He sat gloomily hunched over a glass of whiskey beside him on an inlaid desk, and a long cigar, unlighted, clenched between his teeth. Sulking! He raised his head to glower at her.

"What d'you want? I'm waiting for Gale."

He wasn't going to make it easy. She came closer, her voice trembling a little. "We've always been good pals, haven't we?" Her hand went out, touched him. "Look at me, Hal!"

He looked with moody, bloodshot eyes.

"Yes," she said sadly. "I'm not so young any longer. But then neither are you, Hal. It's beginning to tell."

He moved uneasily, his eyes shifted. He didn't wish to think of these things now.

"I don't see—" he muttered.

"Oh, Hal!" she cried in pity for themselves, and she knelt beside him. "We've made such a mess of it all between us. We'll never come out unless we stand close together; very, very close as we used to. And even then——"

"For Heaven's sake, Nita—" He glanced over

her shoulder. Afraid someone would find them there. Then awkwardly he laid a hand on her bowed head. "It's all in the game, old girl."

"What a game!" she sighed, rising to stand before him.

He knew he was old—as old as that pitiless game that was nearly played out.

"Hal, I'm going to tell you something I should have told you before." She spoke gravely. "I meant to punish you, and so I—" Now she faltered. Once more she saw night upon the canal, the moon colouring Venice; heard the music mingled with her intolerable loneliness; saw Hal and the Contessa gliding away from her; saw them framed in the old doorway, Gale talking. Once more she felt the cruel beat of sun on the beach, and the Contessa scornful, mocking, goading her on. The telegram. Gale's warning sounded again.

Her voice came hurried, frightened. The Marchesa Fabbia was here—yes, in the palazzo, in her own apartments. She, Nita, had done this.

"Don't you see what it means, Hal? Don't you see?"

He was upon her, gripping her arm, hurting her. Heavy with rage, veins darkly swollen, pulses beating, he stammered, "I don't believe it! It's a damnable plot!"

Roughly he pushed her aside and was at the doorway. She ran stumbling after him.

"Hal, wait! What are you——?"

For a moment they faced each other. Then with a savage "I'm going to tell her," he flung out of the room.

No, it didn't matter what happened. Sit here and wait. For what? She dragged herself to a chair. Gay voices reached her, muffled by the tapestry curtain. Life went on and on. You went with it while you could, and when you were riddled with holes you sank. Well, she had done her best. If she were no longer needed——

Hal back again. How long had she been sitting here? She raised her head to stare at him. The dreadful colour had ebbed from his face. Without a word he crossed over to the glass of whiskey on the desk, snatched it up, emptied it. Then, "I wish to Heaven you had let things alone, Nita."

He stood gazing sombrely down at her. She drooped in her chair, weary, forlorn. "I wish to Heaven I had."

He wasn't going to tell her what had happened between him and the Contessa. But something had happened. She watched his tall figure, black and white, move in the vague soft light of the lamp. He paced to and fro. Music. The piano, a woman's voice reached her faintly, evoking the large *salon* of painted rafters, the shadowy guests. He wheeled around by the window, thumb and forefinger twitching at his moustache.

"They've fixed it up between them—Gale and that old gorgon—to ruin her," he broke out. "You've

done your bit. I hope you're satisfied. But I tell you they shan't do it! I'll wring that fellow's neck first! I'll——"

"So you believe her?"

It was hopeless. If he didnt' see——

"Believe her?" he shouted. "Of course I believe her! What's more, I'm going through with this thing. I told her so." In chivalrous wrath, his chest expanded, his shoulders squared, his voice with the old defiant roar filled the room. "She begged me for my own sake to give her back the necklace. It was all a plant to ruin her, she said. She hasn't a scrap of proof that the old woman asked her to sell that necklace. It's a plant, I tell you!" he stormed. "A plant, and she didn't want to let me in for it, she said. Even offered me a compensation. Think I'd take a cent from her?" His fist crashed down on a small table? "I tell you, I'm goin' to show Gale up! I'm goin' through with it! I'm goin' to——"

"Hal, don't make such a noise."

Drearily she ordered herself into action. Someone must take care of him.

"But I tell you, Nita—" he began again.

"Do keep quiet!"

Surely she wasn't mistaken! There had been a slight sound in the hall. Tiptoe to the curtain. She stood rigidly listening. The doors of the dining-room and the *salon* must be closed, for song and voices sounded far away. All the clearer the light,

furtive footsteps outside. Someone in a hurry. Strange that prickly sensation of nerves warning her —warning. Pull aside the curtain!

A short indrawn breath and she was in the hall, her fingers gripping the Contessa's wrist. So this was the woman Hal believed in—this creature hatted and cloaked, and carrying a small valise! Stealing out of the house. Leaving Hal——

"Let me go, you little fool." A low voice, unrecognisable, a lithe body straining to get away.

Try that, would she? Try—try then! Twist that wrist until it hurt.

"You'll see Hal first." She was youthful and strong with hating.

A silent moment of struggle. Then they were in the room, the heavy curtain dropped behind them. Hal stood stupidly gaping.

"Will you let me go?" the Contessa still whispered, glancing over her shoulder.

"You see, Hal? You see what she is?"

"I don't understand." Hal could hardly speak. He stood staring at the valise. The Contessa with a violent movement tried to break away.

"Hal, get by the door! Now, you'd better tell us what we're in for."

They were in for something very serious! Instinct sent that message swiftly through her veins. She was gathered to meet it, every sense sharpened, alert.

"In for? Gaol, thanks to your bungling!" The Contessa fairly spat it out.

Gaol! You always got caught in the end—in the end. Gaol! Her nightmare of all these years. The touch of this woman sickened her. She loosened her grasp, and heard herself as from a distance. "But surely the Marchesa won't——"

"My mother-in-law?"

With a low, ugly laugh, the Contessa pulled free and made for Hal, who stood motionless, his back to the curtain. He stood, his face blotched and ghastly, his eyes staring.

"Give me my necklace and let me go."

But Hal didn't move. His bulk blocked the doorway.

"Why?"

His voice came choked from somewhere deep in his throat. The Contessa laid a hand on his arm. He trembled, clenching, unclenching his big hands.

"Do you know who your Mr. Gale is?" She spoke swiftly. "I thought I'd seen him somewhere. And to-night when you told me—I remembered—years ago in Chicago. He's attorney for Dreser, the jeweller. If you won't give me the necklace, let me go—let me go." She was pleading now, trying to edge past him.

Not so fast. She had Nita Brassington-Welsh to reckon with.

"I still don't understand."

"Pretty innocent, aren't you?" Then it came like

a torrent, muddy, turbulent—a rush of words. "What your husband's got is a copy of the Fabbia necklace. Those jewels in it were stolen from Dreser's. My job was to get rid of them. Get that? And you, you fool, played into Gale's hands." Under the flame of her hair, her face glared, pinched and white. "I must have been mad not to recognise him. I was warned they were watching me. Now, will you let me go?"

"My God!" Hal covered his eyes with his hands.

"Steady, old boy."

His Nita beside him. Rally her wits. Give up the necklace? Let the woman go? Gale would come down on Hal. Run themselves? A confession of guilt.

She moved closer to Hal, a little in front of him. Hold that woman's eyes with her green eyes narrowed. Hold her attention.

"You can't get out. There's a better way——"

A better way—a better way. Her brain worked swiftly, darting in and out, hurling itself against prison walls, recoiling to seek another way. Her hand crept softly up to Hal's coat, her fingers nimble as thieves. Which pocket? She had it from him. The feel of the old velvet box turned her faint.

"Take off that hat and coat," she ordered the Contessa. "Hide your valise behind a chair—anywhere. I'll have to save you to save ourselves."

The Contessa stared at her, stared at Hal, who still blocked the doorway. Mechanically her hand

went to her throat, unclasping her fur collar. The delicate features seemed to have shrunk. Her lips were a thin scarlet line.

"What are you going to do?"

At the coarsened note of that voice, Hal's hands dropped to his sides. He watched her throw off her velvet toque, stoop to thrust her valise out of sight.

"Serves me right for having anything to do with you." She eyed him viciously. "You cheap old adventurer—you! Your wife has more brains in her little finger than you in all your clumsy body."

Quick, while they weren't watching, slip out the necklace. Drop the box on the floor. Shove it with her foot under that bookcase. The jewels lay cold, hidden, on her breast.

The Contessa swept again toward the door.

"At least allow me to go back to my guests."

Her resigned air didn't deceive. She meant to sneak out. Halfway across the room she stopped, her long willowy body in green chiffon swaying backward as if someone had pushed her.

The tapestry curtain was drawn aside. A tall, a terrifying old lady in a black satin evening gown stood peering into the room, a tortoise-shell lorgnette raised to her fierce old eyes. And it was as if all the Fabbias had descended from their frames and were gathered around her, haughtily staring.

"What does this mean, Olga?" Her English was chilly and perfect. "I received a most extraordinary telegram."

You could see the Contessa bracing herself to answer. Let her explain if she could! If Hal would only pull himself together.

"Hal, dear, buck up." Her whisper reached him.

There was a God who wouldn't let poor old Hal —there was a God who cared. She had forgotten——

She felt Hal straighten under her touch. After all, the blood of the Brassingtons——

She knew now what she must risk. It came to her with the flash of inspiration. One chance—one only. It mustn't fail.

Nita Moffett, of Stamford, young as all gallant things—a Nita who comes forth from the secret places of her faith; a Nita, shy, brave, her wide red mouth lifting her face into radiance. And there was a pause between the Marchesa Fabbia and her daughter-in-law, because of this shy, this brave little greenish gold woman in black.

"Madame, I sent that telegram. Please let me tell you—" Not afraid of lorgnettes, or of the fierce old eyes behind them. "Please—" No matter the powder and rouge of Mrs. Brassington-Welsh. So she had smiled long ago.

The Marchesa Fabbia looked at her.

"Madame, my husband, Major Brassington-Welsh." She thought of Brassington Hall, and her head lifted higher.

The Marchesa looked at Hal, and grimly she sat herself down in the nearest chair.

"What have you to tell me, Madame—Brassington-Welsh?"

She met the eagle glare of that proud old face with its aquiline nose. Not only Hal but the Fabbias to save from shame.

"Your daughter-in-law did try to sell your necklace." Look at the Contessa now, backed against the rose wall. Afraid, was she? Well, there was more to come. "But you see"—and confidingly she met the Fabbia eyes—"I didn't think you'd want her to. So——"

Doors opening. Voices in the hall. The concert was over, and any moment Gale——

Smile at Hal as she slipped behind the Marchesa's chair. Her breath came short and swift.

"And so—here it is!"

With a deft gesture, she clasped the necklace around the old lady's neck. In the soft light of the room, diamonds and rubies glittered with a subdued lustre as if tamed by that proud neck of old ivory. The carved gold of the setting took on shadows, took to itself an illusion of ancient times. Who would dare dispute its right to be there?

In the doorway appeared Mr. Gale. You could see behind him in the hall the other man, waiting.

"Ah, Major, I've been looking for you everywhere." Gale's eye was fixed on Hal.

Only a second to risk her last stake. She leaned to whisper to the grim, motionless old lady. "Please—oh, please, whatever happens, don't take it off."

The Marchesa gave no sign of having heard. Disdainful, erect, she sat there, her lorgnette lifted for a chilly inspection of the intruder.

Hal didn't move, didn't speak. He would spoil it all. She must act quickly. Her little smile carried her forward.

"Do come in, Mr. Gale. I'm afraid Hal has a great disappointment for you, haven't you, Hal?"

Give him no time to answer. Mr. Gale's shrewd eyes had travelled. He stopped short, his gaze rivetted on the stately figure in the chair.

Mrs. Brassington-Welsh, bright and gracious, doing the honours. "You know the Marchesa Fabbia, of course, since you're representing her interests here?"

"Representing my interests? What nonsense! I never saw this person before. Who is he?" The Marchesa's voice interrupted, thin, imperious.

The Contessa turned as if she understood.

Act up, Nita, as never in your life before!

"Why, I thought—how very strange of you, Mr. Gale, to have pretended to me—" She stepped up to him. They faced each other as on an open field. Enemies. "The Marchesa Fabbia has changed her mind. She no longer wishes to sell."

Her head flung back, she looked him full in the eyes and smiled. She was ready for the return look he gave her. A hard, pitiless man who judged her. But she held her ground, backing between him and the Marchesa as brusquely he marched forward.

"Madam," he said, and pointed, "is that your necklace?"

The old lady drew herself up, the race of Fabbias in her voice, in her eyes.

"And whose necklace should it be? I am wearing it."

"I'd like to examine it," Mr. Gale insisted, and stretched out his hand.

Her strength must not fail her now. Her voice rang sharp and clear.

"Be careful, Mr. Gale! You're speaking to the Marchesa Fabbia. You have no warrant to touch her."

Hal coming forward. She saw him as in a dream. Heard him. "It can't be done, Gale."

It couldn't. Her poor heart, like a weary sentinel relieved, seemed to stagger, recover. Then the Marchesa Fabbia spoke.

"Olga, ring and have this man shown out."

The Contessa languidly drifted forward. You would never have thought, looking at her, that only a few moments ago, her beauty ravaged, her ugly soul laid bare, she had stood in this room, trapped, desperate. To have saved that creature in saving Hal! Nausea rose up in her.

"Mrs. Brassington-Welsh, may I have a word with you?" Gale's voice, hard, unyielding. His small, tight face stiff in defeat, he was at her elbow.

Slowly she walked with him to the curtained door-

way, where he wheeled about, thrusting his face close to hers.

"I warned you once," he said, hardly lowering his voice. "There's where I made my mistake. You were in with them all the time. You're a bit too clever, madam." His small eyes bored through and through her. "But I'm not done yet. I've had your records looked up. You'll be watched in every city of Europe if I have anything to do with it, and sooner or later they'll get you—sure. Good evening."

He turned on his heels and was gone.

He meant it. Wherever they went from now on——

The Contessa was moving toward the door with an insolent—"If you don't mind. I think there has been enough scandal for one evening. I must go back to my guests."

The sight of the flaming hair and of those thin, mocking lips was like the cut of a lash. Passion lifted her on its last stormy wave.

"You leave Venice," she said.

"As you please, *carina.*" And the Contessa laughed. "We may meet on the same train." Slim, white and shining in her green draperies, she stood poised against the tapestry. Then with a light, taunting, "Take care of the Major; he needs it," she slipped out.

The Marchesa Fabbia sat on in her chair as if she had seen nothing, heard nothing. Hal stood in a

corner like an old sick tree stripped of its leaves. She walked across the room as if she carried a great burden and feared to stumble.

"Madame, I didn't tell you the truth," she said. "When your—when the Contessa leaves this house, you must send that necklace you're wearing to Mr. Gale at the Grand Hotel. It—it isn't yours."

"Do you think I'm blind?" The thin old voice rose with a little quaver, and the Marchesa Fabbia opened a velvet bag that had lain on her knee. "My necklace is here." And the eyes of a Fabbia met the eyes of Nita Brassington-Welsh.

"We can go now, Hal."

He floundered from his corner. Take his arm. He leaned heavily against her.

"Nita—oh, Nita!" he tried to whisper.

"Come." She urged him along.

One glance back as they reached the door. The Marchesa Fabbia sat erect, proudly isolated, like an ancient portrait that has hung for generations looking down at life and death.

CHAPTER VIII

HOME

I

GHASTLY days of wondering what they would do next. Hal sick to the very heart of him, his vanity shattered, his nerve gone. A cheap old adventurer, his Contessa had called him. That's what he was, he muttered over and over to himself. Now what was there left? Gale would keep his word. Wherever they went on the Continent, whatever they did, they would be watched, and it wouldn't take much watching to get Hal if he played any more of his little games.

Well, they could jump into a canal, or blow their tired brains out with Hal's old army pistol. Not a very appealing programme when you came right down to it. There was one other way out—just one. Thank Heaven, she had taken it.

But it was the hardest thing she had ever done in her life—cabling her mother for money to come home. Even then she had not told the truth. Hal was sick, and in temporary financial difficulties. That was not so far from the truth either.

How had she ever managed? Pleading with Hal,

driving him by force of her will, the lash of her tongue, the passion of her tears—getting him from Venice to Paris, from Paris to Havre; getting him on the boat where he collapsed. What a trip it was with its crowding poignant memories of that other trip so long ago when life had seemed brilliant with love and promise!

It was only when they landed that Hal pulled himself together with an effort. He couldn't bear to have her mother know. Let her spare him that final humiliation, and he swore he would do his best to pick up and make a fresh start. Perhaps he was right. Now that they were safe—and they *were* safe!

She smiled across the dinner table at her mother.

Yes, that actually was her mother, that plump, energetic little woman in grey silk.

A great longing came over her to push back her chair and run to fling her arms around her mother's neck before them all and to cry, "Mother, you've been so good to us. It's wonderful of you to have us here. But, oh if you knew! If you knew the beastly life we've led all these years. If you knew the things Hal and I have done—!" Well, and then what? Shame and scandal and no one any the better for it. Lucky, though, that Mrs. Lucas had moved away two years ago to be with Katharine and Crawford.

It was such a very nice party. Surrounding her, the pleasant faces of neighbours were like bright

windows through which she saw herself as she once was—Anita Moffett—brightly moving among their memories of her. Her smile grew more vivid, more alluring. In the pink shaded candle-light she was conscious that she looked her best in the black crêpe-de-chine she had worn on other and different nights. Better not think of them. Yet they were with her as echoes of the sea in a transplanted shell. The diminished surge of foreign sounds, the vague nostalgia for foreign songs and scents throbbed faintly in her blood. She caught Hal's reddish eye and the slight comical grimace he directed at his glass of water. Rather a joke on him not having his wine. Ice-cream, ice-water, pink sugared sweets in silver dishes, white cap and apron on the flat-faced Polish maid. A change for Major and Mrs. Brassington-Welsh.

"Yes, we hope to stay on indefinitely, if mother will have us." Fascinating Mrs. Brassington-Welsh smiling at Roger Mason. He reminded her of a small bottle of some sweet effervescent drink. A Sunday picnic.

Mrs. Mason, in girlish blue, sat opposite. She made one think of sunny rooms, and babies, and a Dodge sedan. Ah well, that too was a relief.

"Toppin' sport. I remember one day the Maharajah—Maj, we called him—sent around one of his pet elephants for us. Strappin' old bird all got up in gold and silks. And my pal, Bibby, Lord Baildng, you know—" Hal was at it again.

The first yellow tulips from the tiny garden gleamed on the lace centre-piece her mother had bought in the dim gentle days of a honeymoon in Italy. Strange how all these things—doilies, flowered dessert plates, silver on the old dark sideboard against the faded green of walls, the bow-legged chairs and oval table, had remained on faithful to Stamford and Moffett ideals, while she——

Hal's laugh rumbled out, leading a chorus of lighter sound. Roger Mason and the Collins boy on her left craned their necks forward. Sit back in her chair and give Hal his audience. Watching this high coloured jovial English gentleman booming away, who would dream that only a few hours ago, in spotted dressing gown and shabby pumps, he lay sprawling on his bed, fretfully yawning! Who would ever believe that only that morning he had borrowed five dollars from the gardener? Not the first time either that she had caught him borrowing small sums while he boasted of his English property and of the confounded nuisance of delayed funds. Ah well, one had to have pocket money!

It took so little to fill him out and set him sailing in fitful gusts of his old heartiness. He was in fine creative form to-night. Pleased with himself, pleased with the effect Major Brassington-Welsh could make on such an honest company. Clever, too, the way he shaped his anecdotes to float brilliantly in the decent air.

"Most 'straordinary fellow! Used to toddle

around after the Duchess tryin' to save her wicked old soul. And then one day she got him to put a pound on 13—roulette, you know, and——"

She had been expecting this story of the good young man at Monte Carlo. Not quite an accurate version, but spicy enough as he rounded it off to thrill most delightfully Mrs. Moffett, Mrs. Mason and Matilda Lacy.

That dear jolly creature, John Morrison, was twinkling at her—his little sweetheart, as he used to call her once upon a time. How he had loved her father! He sat now at her mother's right, a big childlike man with lungs made for laughter and the heart of a boy. She felt herself warm and grateful as she sparkled back at him. What a beautiful white his hair had grown, and how clear and pink his skin! That was what came of being decent in this world. Heigho! Easy enough when one had all that money.

Odd that he should have so obviously taken to Hal. You could tell by the way he had listened, nodding and chuckling, all during dinner. And Hal had played up to him. Trust Hal for that. If it had been anywhere but in her mother's house, she might have worried. No danger. Hal wasn't likely to try any of his shady tricks here. Poor worn out old thing. Sometimes he reminded her of a crumbling tunnel through which a train occasionally roared —a huge noise and then forlorn emptiness.

The noise was there as he launched on another

anecdote—something about a trip he had once taken in the Balkans. Prodigious the way he could handle the globe, patching one place over another, cutting and snipping pieces out of the map to suit his exploits. The room was silent, everyone listening.

She had never heard him talk quite like this; as if he were evoking images, scenes, sounds for himself alone; as if, among them all, he suddenly *were* alone. He had forgotten even her—even his Nita. She felt hot adventure coursing through him. It reached her own veins and tingled like a pain. How thin he looked and restless, with feverish spots on his cheeks, his large nose jutting sharply out, and his black hair streaked with grey.

He told of white houses, and dust, and swift little horses pounding past villages where gaunt wolf dogs howled at night; of peasants dancing and singing, flowers behind their ears. He told of oil, and wheat, and coal, and dangerous stupid hates that bided their time along the thin lines of frontiers. Of kings and queens.

Bucharest, with its cafés, and Tziganes, and pretentious gaiety, like a vicious child aping its elders; with its treacly-eyed, over-tailored young men, who sat gossiping of women while they sipped syrups and cocktails at Capsa's——

Belgrade, looking like a Midway Plaisance a week after the Fair, with its glum suspicious people, its ambition, its German, its dirty hotels and homesick Americans. Dinner at the Serbski Krahl——

And now he was travelling in aeroplanes through wind storms over the cities of the world, peering down at the land which lay like old worn velvet embroidered with the silver of rivers. Ah, it was a great life——!

Really now, but really, he was going too high, too far, leaving her behind. All very well for him to hypnotise her mother's guests, but he was hypnotising himself.

She stirred in her chair. She sent out to him the silent secret message of her will, electric between them. He turned and her green eyes, deliberately mocking, met his. Her wise little smile was like a wire stretched along his headlong course to trip him.

His flight had taken him to Buda-Pesth where he was just landing. He landed abruptly under her cynical gaze. He flushed a darker red, and his hand trembled as he lifted a glass of water. "I've been making a bally ass of myself," he muttered. And that nervous self-conscious look of recent months gathered about his brow, and would not be lifted even by protestations from every side, John Morrison's the loudest.

Cruel of her. Mutely she apologised. He felt he had a grievance. He was going to sulk. Well, she had only meant to protect him. He knew perfectly well that he couldn't be trusted when he let himself go.

Her mother, sweetly reluctant to interrupt, gave the hostess signal. Hal rose heavily. His face was

all folds and wrinkles like a sail that has lost its wind and, suddenly showing the marks of wear, the sad stains and creases, waits for another wind to smooth and round it out again. Her heart yearned toward him. But he wouldn't look at her.

"It's a great experience to listen to your husband." Matilda Lacy, small and bony in her ruffled pink dress, took her by the hand. "My dear, what a lucky girl you are!" Behind her glasses, her little eyes seemed to be swimming around and around like fishes trying to get out of a pool.

Yes—rather. Of course she was lucky.

"Your husband makes me feel as if I had missed a lot." Roger Mason was walking with her to the door.

"You must come over some time." She said it as if she were inviting him for a week-end at her country house.

Sorry she had been mean to Hal. But the slightest thing upset him these days. She lingered alone in the hall, a wistful little woman feeling homely memories flow about her. The stiff backed chair by the door on which her father had always left bundles, the dark carved chest with its nicked edge, the Colonial mirror hanging always a bit crooked, and the brown stairs leading to the narrow upper hall—they all spoke to her. Hal was too big for this house. You could hear him through walls and ceilings—his heavy step, the rumble of his voice. He made you think of a caged animal with that

trick of his of tramping up and down—a scarred old fighter who has been in many traps.

He and Morrison had not yet left the dining room. Through the green plush portières she saw them standing by the table, solemnly engaged in clipping and lighting two handsome cigars, the kind Hal, in his prosperous days, had lavishly handed around to chance acquaintances. With such a prop, his moustache seemed to take on a bolder curve, his cheeks a ruddier tone.

"I was much interested in your account of the Balkans, Major," John Morrison was saying as if he had known Hal all his life. Her father, who Heaven only knew was naïve enough, used to reproach his old friend for being of a too trusting nature. Well, there was humour of a sort in the attraction between these two men. She liked to watch them together.

Here was Ilka waddling along with the coffee tray. Stupid girl. Smile at her prettily. "Oh, yes, Ilka—the coffee? Serve it on the porch, please."

Better join the others.

"We sent one of our men to Belgrade last summer and——"

"Belgrade! My dear fellow, I can tell you all about it." Hal sounded the generous note of comradeship. "Intimate friend of mine, Colonel Watkins—ever heard of him?—has one of the biggest banks in——"

"Nita—coffee, dear." Her mother's voice drifted from the porch.

"Coffee—Hal," she brightly repeated, sparkling at them from the doorway.

"Coming in a moment, dear thing." Hal turned an abstracted eye. Not to be interrupted if he knew it.

She turned slowly and went through the hall, through the sitting room to the shadowy group on the adjoining porch. She stood framed in the door, the light from the sitting-room catching the greenish gold of her hair, her wide mouth like a red flower in the dusk. And there must have been something exotic, something faintly troubling and foreign about her, for there was a silence broken by Miss Lacy's friendly chirp—"I declare, Nita, you're younger than ever."

"Am I?" That made her feel old. She settled on a stool at her mother's knee to sip the coffee that the Collins boy brought to her. "Hal and Mr. Morrison are entrenched in the dining-room and won't be pried out." She let herself sink lazily into the kindly atmosphere. Nothing to fear.

A spring wind fanned her cheeks, brought scents of growing things sharp in the night. She thought of narcissus, and those neat neighbourly little lawns with their flower beds, and white curtained windows across the road. Windows warm with lamplight. The young moon was sharp in a sky of spring. The maple tree swollen with buds that

seemed to be bursting with the twitter of birds. It was good to be back. It was good.

"You take it and melt it and when your jelly's cold, you pour it in—" Her mother's comfortable voice went on and on. And shyly her mother's hand stroked her hair as she moved her stool closer.

This was the way it should be on a spring night. On other porches other groups of people sitting and talking, rocking gently in swings. Hundreds of them. Hundreds. Rows of houses with porches and lawns, and the flutter of light gowns as young girls flitted out on the road. Phonographs, laughter, neat little cars skimming by. She thought of Paris in springtime—the Seine, colour of white grapes, the horse-chestnut trees, violets, and green almonds, and the smells that prickled through your blood, and the cafés opening like flowers, and lovers curved like the young moon. Oh, why had their life been so ugly?

"Asleep, Nita?" someone teased.

"I tell you the League of Nations is the only answer. Why, those fellows over there—" Morrison must have quietly joined them while she sat dreaming. He stood on the porch steps, a broad solid shape, white hair and shirt front gleaming. Where was Hal?

"Anita dear, don't you think you could play for us a little?" Her mother bending down. That familiar face close to hers, the fine puckers about the

large pale mouth and the faded loving eyes. How sweet it was!

"Oh, yes, do."

"Didn't you used to sing, Nita?"

They were fond of her. They admired her. She was different, very different—more apart from them than they could ever know. But they had warmed the frozen waters, and lit dark corners with their friendliness. And she was grateful to them. "I'm afraid I've forgotten." She knew she wanted to play at this hour as she rose from her stool, and flashed the radiance of Nita Moffett's smile.

"We'll sit out here and listen." How pleased her mother was! A successful party.

Her fingers craved the stained ivory of the old piano. Put out the lights in the sitting-room, all except one, the corner lamp of poppy red. In that shabby leather armchair near the empty fireplace her father, slender and patient, used to sit after dinner, and while she played to him, he would close his eyes. Anita Moffett, yearning for the wide, wide world, yearning for romance and adventure, sitting at the piano through winter, through summer evenings. Nita Brassington-Welsh sitting there now with the bitterness of secret knowledge locked in the secret places. Never the same—never again.

Could she play? A bowl of tulips on the piano, the old remembered things that peopled the room seemed to creep closer, to listen and encourage. Her

fingers went shyly to the keys, seeking them. The wasted years—the countries—she and Hal— Oh weary, weary of adventuring. And now——

"Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie."

She sang softly, her head tilted back, her eyes half-closed. And she thought of Hal as once he had been, dashing and gay; of the long road they had trod together, the road that twisted through murky places. And while they were young there was glamour in never knowing. But now they were no longer young.

"Home is the sailor, home from sea,
And the hunter home from the hill."

Her voice faltered. Her hands on the keys went soft and limp. Why was she sad? "And the hunter home from the hill."

"That's bully," came from Roger Mason. And there were other voices, her mother's, John Morrison's suggesting old favourites, and young Collins'—"What about a fox-trot, Mrs. Brassington-Welsh?"

But the voice she listened for wasn't among them. And her heart was so grateful, so tender and sad with music that she wanted her man. She wanted to look at the secret map of his face, tracing the

years, the sins and follies, the frustrated aspirations, the recklessness, wistfulness, kindliness, and the love of her that was there for her to see.

"I'll have to practice up, I'm afraid." She appeared before them, brightly apologetic. But her eyes went questing about. "Where's Hal?"

"I'm sure I don't know." Her mother sounded the least bit reproachful. "He told Mr. Morrison he was coming right along."

"He went to find a report on recent imports to the Balkans to show me." Morrison spoke up eagerly. Frightfully keen on Hal, that was obvious.

"Well, I'd better go and hunt for him." They called after her. Pretend not to hear. Frail and haunting the melody ran through her head like a stream that she seemed to be following. Where?

"And the hunter home from the hill." She hummed it as she drifted along.

The front door in the hall was open. She saw the narrow pebbled path wan in the young moonlight, the small squares of lawn on either side, a darker blob of flower bed, and the lilac bush to the right. The murmur of voices came from the porch on the left side of the house. Someone laughed. How small and tidy it all looked, calm in the night, undisturbed by delicate fragrances, by the distant tang of salt.

She saw him. He stood motionless, tall and dark against the lilac bush. She went to him quickly.

2

He didn't move when she spoke to him. But his big hand fell on her shoulder.

Oh, the fragile scent of lilac! These simple scents of earth and blossom that had been wafted across the exiled years to reach her here and now. Nostalgia. For what and why?

"Funny thing," he said. "I've been wonderin'—feelin' sort of restless—wonderin' what the devil it's all about." Words like the tap-tapping of a blind man's staff, groping along strange high-walled ways.

"What it's all about, Hal dear?" But she thought she understood. And the melody ran through her like a rope that held their battered little boat in harbour.

His hand was heavy on her shoulder. "You were singin' in there, and I got to thinking of the old days. We've had some good times, haven't we, dear thing?" She heard the appeal in his low roughened voice, and felt, as if in her own cheeks, the dark blood of regret surging. He was so huge beside her.

She had feared this. She had feared that the time would come. But so soon? "Hal dear, aren't you happy here?" It was a whisper.

His hand dropped to his side. "I don't want to be an ungrateful beast," he muttered. "It's a rip-

pin' place. Jolly little house and all. And your mater's a bit of all right. That fellow Morrison's a great old bird, too. It's that rot I talked at dinner—" He turned as if he couldn't bear the scent of lilac. "Got me going, don't you know."

Touch him gently. Yes, she knew. It was the night—in her blood, too. Missing something—missing. They ought to go in.

"D'you remember that night at Montigny, Nita? —you and me. Remember I only had fifty francs in my pocket? Couldn't even order a decent wine. Not half bad the dinner, though. Jolly sittin' there on that bit of terrace watchin' the river, what's its name."

She remembered. They had been alone in the *Vanne Rouge* that evening of a May moon. A little table for two close to the silvery River Loing. The old lame waiter had treated them as lovers. And they had taken an old boat with red cushions. Oh, that winding river, and the thin rushes like wands, and the closed water lilies! And when they got back to their cheap hotel in Paris, Hal had just six francs left. How unreal it made everything seem here! She gave a little laugh that was like a sob.

"D'you remember, Hal, that Christmas we spent at Fontainebleau? You were flush then. You were —" Ah, yes, he was indeed, thanks to a successful little business deal with a Belgian. She hadn't known about that until afterwards.

Hal was staring up at the Stamford sky. She

slipped her hand in his and slowly, as if they were going somewhere, they moved around the lilac bush, farther from the porch.

"The Hotel de France et d'Angleterre," he murmured, and looking up at him, she saw the sudden boyish gleam of his teeth. "Put us in a bridal suite, didn't they, old dear? Top-hole all those prints and that Louis——"

"Louis XVI," she supplied.

"Museum stuff. But, oh Lord, that Romanée Conti, 1900, and that *canard au oranges*——"

Fontainebleau in winter—all silver tones and musing pools and grave dreamy avenues, and ghosts of gallant kings who went a-hunting and wooing. Major and Mrs. Brassington-Welsh walking through the twilights there.

She started at the squawk of a motor horn. They were standing now on the kitchen side of the house where lilies of the valley grew under the porch. Through the kitchen window she saw the Polish maid pottering about, her flat face a dull white plaque. What was the use of going back and back? It only hurt, a queer obscure ache. "Hal, we must really go in."

From the next house a phonograph brayed "The Sheik." They were dancing. She heard the shuffle of feet, and young laughter sprayed the air.

"There was a night in Pesth. Remember, Nita? We sat on the roof of the Ritz drinking Moët et Chandon, 1906. Lookin' out at old Buda and down

on the Danube. You said it was like the blue of carbon paper, and any minute you expected the stars to tear larger holes in the sky. And that Gypsy chap in the red coat played for you. Cost me a thousand kronen to stop him."

"Hal, don't—oh, don't!" Why did he do this to her? She heard the foreign songs and saw the foreign faces. Her hands went out to push them away. They had no place here.

Hal was bending over her. He gripped her by the elbows and held her fast. The orderly pattern of houses and gardens seemed to recede. He blotted them out. He blotted out Stamford. He looked at her so strangely. She looked back, and there was nothing hidden between them.

The phonograph next door had stopped. The thin quaver of night insects rustled in the young grass. She heard the homely rattle of dishes in the kitchen and, distantly, the rumble of a train. Hadn't she suffered enough?

"Yes, and what about those other nights—and days?" They were all there in the face she lifted to his.

He turned aside. He let her go.

"Oh, Hal,—my dear, my dear, what would we have done if we hadn't come here? Mother's been so kind. I'd hoped—" Why, she was crying!

He stood heavily, his long legs apart, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, his head sunk forward.

He seemed to have closed a door, and to be tiptoeing away on a stealthy errand.

She felt suddenly lonely and frightened. He could let her cry like this, softly, forlornly. How stupid and futile it was, working themselves up this way! She dabbed at her eyes with a tiny ball of a handkerchief.

"Sorry, old girl." He stretched out his long arm and patted her on the shoulder. "Don't you worry. I'm not takin' you away."

"We ought to know better." Everything had slipped back into place. She was protected, reassured by familiar forms. She breathed in the scent of lilacs. "Don't let's play with that old frippery again. It's dangerous." And she smiled with a wry curl of her wide, red mouth. "What can they be thinking of us? We really must go back."

"Right-o." He sounded cheerful enough as he swung along beside her across the pebbled path, across the second strip of lawn.

"They're such dears." It was almost an appeal. She wanted him so to like them. She wanted him so to be happy.

The porch grew out of the house, part of it, part of the decent lovely evening. It didn't need any willow-lined River Loing, any park of dead kings, any Danubes. There they were, her mother and her friends, just where she had left them. She caught the blur of light stuff in the shadowy group-

ing of figures. "After all—after all, we couldn't ask for more than just this," she murmured.

"What? Ah, yes—yes, indeed, my dear." He bent gallantly over her, took her arm and squeezed it with a quick little tender motion. Good old boy!

It was the kind of thing they would appreciate: to see herself and Hal returning arm in arm from a moonlight stroll. Lovers.

The Collins boy, draped on the porch railing, waved.

"Here we are—here we are." Hal's voice ran up a little hill and down again. Very English.

"We'd given you up," called Mr. Morrison.

"Where have you two been?" her mother indulgently enquired from the depths of a wicker rocking chair.

"Ask Hal." She looked up at them, smiling.

"Flirtin' with my wife. Shockin' bad form." He stood there, his knowing eye cocked at her, a hand to his moustache.

She brushed past him and up the steps. The circle closed around her. Talk of books, of music, of plays. How ignorant she was! She must read more. Go to concerts. Her mother rocked and looked at her fondly.

"Yes, it was wonderful," Mrs. Mason was saying. "I had season tickets. Next winter, if you like, Nita, we can arrange——"

Her attention drifted. Why had Hal, instead of joining them, settled down on the lower porch steps

with Mr. Morrison? She could just see the line of their shoulders hulking up, the shape of their heads, light and dark, drawn close together.

If he got all excited again, he would have one of those restless nights, tossing and moaning in nightmares, nearly driving her crazy.

"I'd simply love to," she said to Mrs. Mason, and leaving Matilda Lacy's passionate opinions on Slavic literature to be answered by someone better informed, she managed unobtrusively to rise and gain the top step.

Yes, Hal was at it again. Hard to hear with so much chatter going on behind her. Pretend to gaze out at the night. There was nothing in the night for her but the rumble of his voice, the jerky gestures of his long arms as he sprawled below her talking into Morrison's ear.

"Fact, my dear chap. One of the Standard Oil men told me, himself—" drifted up to her. "Our English banks out there are doin' the financing of American enterprise and handlin' the dollars. Not a single one of your——"

Well, there was nothing alarming in that kind of talk. What, after all, had she expected to hear?

"I believe they tried it out in Constantinople and had to close down. Not enough business," Morrison was saying.

"Doesn't prove anything." Hal leaned impressively forward, tapping Morrison's knee. "Belgrade's the place, sir. Take my word for it. Why,

in one year two and a half million dollars came in with returned emigrants and remittances from the States. Not to mention the matter of imports and exports to anyone knowin' the values. Did I say Belgrade?" He began to wave about and raise his voice. "Startin' in a small way, I can see a chain of your banks spreadin' over the Balkans—yes, and into Hungary, sir. I'm goin' against my own country in tellin' you these things. But, by Jove, it isn't sport, I say. It isn't sport for us to get all the pickin's. Ought to work together like brothers, eh, what? Ought to——"

"Dear me, how dull!" She descended merrily upon them.

"Let the poor tired banker be, Hal. He'd rather talk golf, I'm sure. Wouldn't you?" She slipped in between them, an arch little woman with coaxing ways.

Hal was furious at her for interrupting. Let him glower at her back then. She turned to meet John Morrison's eyes. He smiled at her as he used to when she hunted in his pocket for sweetmeats. But perhaps she had made a mistake in so childishly breaking in.

Hal, with an abrupt movement, had got to his feet, leaving her cuddled in her coquettish pose on the step beside Mr. Morrison.

"Good gracious, d' you know what time it is?"

"Why, I had no idea——"

The scrape of chairs and patter of voices drew

her up with an eager—"Oh, don't go yet." She suddenly dreaded the end of the evening as if the warmth of these old friends, receding, would leave her at the mercy of a small cold wind. It had been such a very nice party.

They all told her so as they stood in the hall, plucking out their scarves and wraps from the pile on the chair.

No, she hadn't played tennis for years, but she'd love to try. Yes, tea on Tuesday at five. Well, she didn't know exactly, she'd have to ask Hal.

"Hal dear——"

She turned to find him at her elbow. "Look here, Nita, I'm going a bit of the way with Morrison. Don't wait up for me."

"All right." She tried to sound indifferent. But she didn't like it, and he knew she didn't. He might have stayed with her. He might have——

"Good night, Nita, see you to-morrow."

"Good night, Mrs. Moffett, we've had the grandest time."

"You don't object to my carrying off your husband, I hope?" John Morrison was holding out his hand. There was a quizzical gleam in his eye.

"Of course not," she answered a trifle sharply.

She watched them down the path, Hal bareheaded, swaggering along with his stick, Morrison's short stocky figure solidly moving beside him. Two men escaping together.

The others packed in the Mason motor, waved and shouted and were gone up the road.

Still she stood in the open door staring at the orderly shapes, trim in the moonlight; at the soft blur of the lilac bush. Why was she sad? Not really sad, but fretful as if some small sly animal were nibbling at the peace of the night, crumbling it away——

"Well, dear, it was pleasant, wasn't it?" Her mother's arm went comfortably around her. They stood shoulder to shoulder, looking out. Her mother's white hair and grey silk were pale in the doorway. And her mother's face was like a bit of fine embroidery fading with quiet wear.

Oh, yes, she had loved it all, every moment of it. Wonderful being home again. Wonderful——

Her voice suddenly wavered. No reason for it—absolutely no reason. But she felt the mournful ache of tears. She felt soft and plaintive, drawn toward that placid breast. Only to lay her head there and to whimper out the bitterness of years!

Her mother, without looking at her, said—"Ilka really took great pains with the dinner, didn't she? I must tell her how good the mushrooms were. And I thought the way she fixed the mayonnaise in the tomatoes particularly nice."

Good Heavens, suppose she *had* let herself go! In a moment of self-pity to have shattered the one thing she had fiercely protected all these years—her

mother's pride and faith! She was rocked and sickened with the ebbing of her impulse.

Was it possible that her mother had felt nothing; that secure and blameless in her solid world this quivering moment had passed her by?

No more talk. What she wanted most was a white bed with coloured quilt, drawn shades and all the drowsy night laid softly over her. Not even Hal——

How quiet her mother had become beside her! When had she last spoken? "Don't you think we'd better go in, mother? She turned to meet those faded eyes. Their dim blue was strangely wise and sorrowful, as if——

But no! Impossible. There were things a woman like her mother could never, never guess, never know. Were there?

"The lilacs were beautiful last spring," her mother said. "Yes, come in, child. It's growing late."

Of course, she couldn't know. "Shall I lock the door, mother? Hal has a key." Bright, busy little woman trotting to and fro. Not a care in the world —for anyone to see.

Click, out went a light, then another. Shadows were warm and friendly. Snuggle close to her mother. Up they went together, up the familiar stairs, a light from the upper hall guiding them. Everything cosy and comfortable.

"Is there anything you need?" Her mother lingered, her face soft, almost beseeching.

"Nothing at all. Good night, dear." Odd, that second of diffidence, of embarrassment, between them before the swift shy kiss.

Suddenly she wanted to be alone. Hal would be coming, soon. And she wanted to be alone.

She was light on her feet and vivid as she turned, her hand on the knob of her door. Her mother must think of her so—a happy Nita, happily mated, glad to be home.

"Sleep well." On that last gay note she opened and closed her door. Her mother's door at the end of the hall closed like an echo.

And she might have spoiled it all. Better the lie that she lived here night and day; the lie she dressed up and paraded as Major and Mrs. Brassington-Welsh. Contemptible—yes, perhaps. But the dreary disgust of it was for herself, alone. Hal didn't care. Not he. She was right to spare her mother. Those dim blue eyes, what had they seen? Well, even supposing—! She hadn't spoken. That was the point.

She had been standing motionless by the door. And now the room came to her with its ghosts, and she became aware of it—this room of her girlhood. Passionate Anita Moffett of long ago, dreaming here, longing for the great world, for foreign countries and handsome lovers. How Hal had chuckled over those enlarged photographs of the Place de la Concorde, the Forum, Westminster Abbey, and the Florentine Madonna in colour! Yes, it was funny

enough, she supposed. Culture was hardly what she had got out of Europe. And there were her books on the same old shelf, neatly ranged and dusted—yellow-backed French novels, tales of romance, of travel.

Heigho! Slip off her dress and stays, and get into her kimono. Heaven knew when he would be back. Comfortable. Nita, greenish gold as a jonquil, green-eyed Nita staring in the mirror, hunting for that other. If you looked at yourself long enough and hard enough, you saw the stranger.

The bed was soft. She was glad to have it alone for a while. Hal worried her in this room.

Blue and pink flowers still gallantly climbed their trellis on the wall. You followed them up and up to the crack in the ceiling. She missed the old curtains with their big pink roses in an arabesque of leaves. But the new chintz was very pretty. And the old white furniture was cheerful. Not so white now. A bit scratched and dented, just as *she* was for that matter. Hal, of course, had been up to his usual tricks. A charred spot where he had left a cigarette burning on the bureau. One of the best fringed guest towels on the chiffonier, rumpled and grimed with ashes. And the mark of tumblers set carelessly down on tables. He must have stolen another drink after dinner. The air smelt faintly of whiskey. Ah well, you couldn't expect him to change.

Growing sleepy. Hal would wake her up when

he came back. Meanwhile it was pleasant to look at the Place de la Concorde in its gilt frame hanging opposite the bed. You walked into the picture, and it spread and spread, with little people moving about and crazy speeding motors. The smell of asphalt. Green gardens and fountains playing. The Arc de Triomphe came striding down the great avenue on stilts. Nearer and nearer. Careful or it would step on her. Colours flashing—balloons and children. Those weren't balloons; they were lights, red and orange lights in the tracery of chestnut leaves. The moon was a peacock with an immense glittering plumage of stars. He strutted about in the sky and sang—*"Reçevez ces Violettes, C'est de l'amour que l'on achéte."*

But he didn't mean violets. He meant lilacs——

3

Hal was telling her something she didn't want to understand. He was going round and round it in narrowing circles. She sat and stared at him, huddled in a corner of the old plush sofa in the sitting-room. The big yellow shaded lamp on the table beside her shone down on magazines and the slender vase with its single fat stalk of white hyacinth. The house was very quiet this evening for her mother had gone to a bridge club and supper was over. So they were alone.

What had she been thinking of these past three

days? She should have stood guard over him ever since the dinner party when he and Morrison had gone off together. Should have noticed the restless shift of his temper from brooding fits to feverish elation. But in this clear atmosphere she had forgotten old habits of caution. And now——

"I warned Morrison I hadn't the foggiest notion about banking. I'm not such an awful duffer, though. And, after all, I'm a man of the world—what?" He sounded his complacent note.

She must hear him out. Her nerves were on edge as he tramped from the piano to the fireplace, from the fireplace to the window where vines peered wanly in, a thin pattern stencilled by the moon.

He stood wagging a finger. "D'you realise that all exchange in the Balkans is based on dollars? When an English bank—say in Belgrade—wants to buy pounds, they jolly well have to buy dollars first. Chap I met in London told me——"

Oh, why was it that nothing ever stayed where you put it? It crept up on you and past you in the night, and waited around the turn of the road to spring at you, cunningly altered, a sly thing that has got the best of you. She felt suddenly helpless as if the hold she had here in this room were weakening. And she gathered herself together for the question she feared to ask—"Hal, what does it all mean? What are you up to?"

That hit him fairly, and she saw the dark flush

spread. He stood a moment fumbling at his moustache, his head lowered as if for a plunge.

She waited, watching him turn and flounder in the stillness of the air. Outside, voices and footsteps passed along the road. And the night slipped in, she thought, like an old friend, bringing gifts of perfume. She was glad of the familiar things about her.

But when he didn't answer, comfort went out of them. Her nerves hummed a warning. The light of the lamp showed up the wary green of her eyes, the taut red line of her lips as she leaned forward among the cushions.

"Hal!" She called him sharply.

He came to her, and loomed above her looking down. Then she knew that once he had spoken nothing would ever be the same between them again.

"Tell me." She made herself gentle, because she dared not trust herself to be otherwise.

"What else have I been doin'? Well, in plain English, I'm goin' over—to Belgrade first." His voice was loud and excited. Defying her. She saw him a blurred red and black, his arms jerking up and down. "Morrison's sendin' me. He thinks there's a chance for a branch of his bank out there. You needn't look at me like that, Nita. I can't stand it. I can't stay on here, rottin' away—that's what I'm doin'—just rottin' away." He towered above her, working himself into a passion. "And now I can go back—everything paid, mind you. All

I've got to do is to send in a report when I've looked around and consulted a few of the big fellows who know their Balkans. Why, as I told Morrison, if we can get a backing——"

"As *you* told him?" Her lips moved stiffly. There was no shame in him, no pity. Rotting away here! That was the way he put it.

"Now look here, Nita——"

"I won't go—I won't." She lay crumpled on the sofa, her face buried in the cushions. Fists clenched beat against the wood, against the plush.

"You can't make me. Go away—don't touch me." He was bending over her. Hate was in her like a sickness. She shuddered and ached with sobbing.

Out of blackness coloured fragments formed and whirled—ships, trains, dingy rooms, streets with foreign smells and voices, glary restaurants, bars, indifferent mocking faces and fingers pointing at Major and Mrs. Brassington-Welsh. Harried, hounded over the Continent, sinking lower and lower.

"Nita—Nita!" He was shaking her.

Going to Belgrade on Morrison's money. Why, he never meant to go near Belgrade. Lying to her father's old friend, lying to himself, lying to her.

"Will you listen?" His fingers dug into her shoulders. He was forcing her around to face him. "I'm going alone, d'you hear me? I'm not taking you." He shouted it in her ear.

Not taking her. What did he mean? She was

startled out of her sobbing. Spent and limp, she looked at him, at his hot bitter eyes, the purplish tinge of his cheeks, the deepened lines about nose and mouth. He was suffering. He deserved to suffer.

He held her a moment as if he never could let her go. Then abruptly he released her and rose. "Yes, I'm leavin' you here with your mother and your friends. That's what you want, isn't it?" His voice was low and harsh.

She sat on, staring up at him, trying to grasp this thing. He was leaving her like a bit of old luggage. She had lived with him all these years. She had been faithful. And now he was leaving her! Home meant nothing to him, she meant nothing, a decent life meant nothing.

"Good God, Nita, don't take it like that. I swear I'm coming back. It's only for a little while. Why, it's the biggest chance I've ever——"

"If you go, you'll never come back." Strange how quiet, how deadly quiet she felt now as if there were nothing left in her to struggle and fight. She rose to her feet. They were cold and dead. Finger-tips icy. "You'll never come back. You know it. Once you get over there with money in your pocket, it will be the same old thing. You'll spend it—every cent. And then——"

"I tell you you're wrong. I've every intention——"

"Every intention!" She couldn't bear to look at

him. The pain was at her heart like a brutal hand prying it loose.

He was pleading his cause, trying to persuade her, trying to persuade himself. Did she think for a moment he would take Morrison's money on false pretenses? Did she think he could play such a rotten trick on a man who trusted him? Wasn't it to his advantage to carry through his mission, to make a success of it? After all, Morrison was right in sending him over. He knew his Europe, he knew the ropes. If he left her behind it was because she wanted to be left. He would just run over there and——

Yes, that was the comfortable way he would put it to himself. She turned her back on him and walked to the window. Suppose he had gone already, suppose she were standing here alone looking out at these homely shapes under the moon. What would it be like? Her mother standing beside her, perhaps. How peaceful the houses, the white road, the flowering bushes and dark patches of lawn! And then the pain again at her heart.

The heavy tread of his feet sounded behind her. He was marching up and down. Talking. He was charged with honourable intentions. He had himself in Belgrade, brilliantly conducting his business. He saw himself conferring with officials, with financiers; saw himself bustling through the Balkans leaving behind him a trail of banks; saw himself magnificently returning to her with the mark of

accomplishment on his noble brow. Could hear himself, no doubt, saying, "Didn't I tell you——?"

Was this, indeed, she, Nita, this pale little woman tamely consenting to be set aside? Letting her man go. Her man, sorry trickster though he might be. And what would become of him? What would have become of both of them had they gone on? And without her— Suppose another woman——

The very thought of it whirled her around. Oh, but there was still fight left in her! "You have it all fixed, haven't you?" Her tone was as biting as she knew how to make it. "You're convinced that you're headed for Belgrade? Convinced of your abilities?"

She had caught him in the middle of a windy gust that was blowing him over the Continent and back. He struggled a moment in his fine flight. "I was simply tellin' you——"

Her turn to tell him. She crossed slowly over to where he stood by the piano. "You spoke the other night of Colonel Watkins. I infer that he's one of the 'big fellows' who, you've no doubt assured our friend Morrison, will welcome you with open arms."

He didn't like that. "I'd have to see him, of course. Why the devil shouldn't he see me? I've got a perfectly sound proposition. Morrison's name——"

"Morrison's name!" Her little laugh was like the flick of a whip. "Yours is better known over there, my dear." Wiser to hurt him now. Make

him see himself in the knowing merciless light of her green eyes. Hurt him, even while it sickened her to uncover his soul. She had only begun. "Do you remember when and how you met Colonel Watkins?"

He gave her an ugly look. "I don't see——"

"You met him," she pursued, "at Anna's Bar in Vienna, didn't you? You forced yourself on him a bit too obviously. And then your amiable friend, Mr. Wertner, unfortunately joined you. And the next time you met Colonel Watkins on the street, I seem to remember, he cut you dead."

"Damn it all, what's that got to do with it?" he blustered. "You mind your own business, Nita."

"And the others?" she went on without pity. "McKelvey had you run out of Sofia. The Consul in Bucharest is a brother of young Daniels whom you trimmed so neatly in Cairo. And you dare to tell me that you expect to show your face to any of those men?" Her voice gave her away, gave away the pain, the revolt. "How can you, Hal? Oh, how can you? Because Morrison is our friend, because he met you here in this house, because he's too enthusiastic, too trusting, you've made him believe all these fairy tales. You almost believe them yourself. I give you credit for that." Fight the weariness that was coming over her. "Deep in your heart you know. You won't confess it? Then I'll tell you. I am telling you—" He made her do it. She faced him, her head flung back, her voice lashing him.

"You're ready to use anything as a pretext—anything—to get back. You can't stand being decent, you can't stand decent people. You're a poor old actor who only knows his one part, and he'll play it best on a familiar stage. There isn't one real thing in you—any more. The fine edges have been dulled and you only like what is coarse and common—drinking and boasting in filthy rotten bars—being a good fellow, you call it—the kind who fleeces other good fellows if he can." Through a mist she saw his face, grey, twisted. Well, he must listen now.

"You're not as clever as you used to be. That's the difference. And over there, they know your type. You won't pass easily any more. Have you forgotten what the Contessa said? Have you forgotten Venice and Mr. Gale? Do you realise that the police in every city on the Continent have been warned to watch for you? Not that you're worth catching. You're only a poor kind of adventurer now, my dear. Europe is full of them. So are the gutters."

"Nita!—you—you—" He was leaning against the piano breathing like a runner who has run his race. The blood was back in his face, beating and throbbing. "So that's what you think of me?" His voice was thick as if he were choking. He made an effort and stepped up to her, swaying and breathing——

What had she done to him! She wanted to

stretch out her arms, to ask his forgiveness. But there was no strength in her. It was she who was defenceless before him. He was seeing into her; seeing into the haunted places where the pain and disgust of years stirred among a débris of shabby scenery. He was seeing her poor prayers tattered and torn from the book. He was seeing the years ahead as she, herself, now saw them.

"Can't we ever be happy?" she cried in final appeal.

He answered her sombrely. "You'd have done well to let me go with a bit of illusion left. I might have carried through. I might have. But you're right." Bitter his voice and bitter his eyes as he turned away. "You're the only woman I've ever cared tuppence about, and look at the wreck I've made of your life."

She should comfort him, she supposed, as she had done so many times before. But what comfort was there? They had spoken the truth. And the time for lies was passed.

He waited for her to come to him. When she did not come, he went to her, and stood over her again, his face gaunt and grey in the lamplight. "You'll be better off without me," he said hoarsely. "That's why I'm gettin' out—that's how much I care—that's how much! You don't believe me, do you?"

If only she could believe him! "Yes, you love me, Hal—in your way. But that's no reason for leav-

ing me." Oh, what was the use of picking over their life?—two beggars quarrelling over the contents of a rag bag.

"Love you in my way! A hell of a way, isn't it? That's what you mean. A hell of a way—" He was growing wilder.

She shut her eyes, but could not shut out the tramp of his feet coming and going. If he did this thing, if he went off with Morrison's money, leaving her to explain to her mother, to explain to her father's old friend— No, he couldn't do such a thing. He couldn't.

"I can't stand it, I tell you." His voice, raised and desperate, forced her to look at him.

"Please, Hal,—please,—haven't we said enough?" Her head ached intolerably.

"We've said too much. We've said it all." He strode past her to the doorway. "I'm finished. Understand? I'm finished," he shouted, and flung out of the room.

Finished! Had one ever finished? She stayed where she was. She heard him heavy on the stairs. He didn't mean it, of course. She heard him marching overhead in their room. The night came softly in, and the old things around her seemed to settle back in the hush after his going. She felt mournful among them, and very lonely.

Silence gathered about her, pressing down. Did one ever know? Did she really know? Suddenly

she was afraid as she had never been afraid in all her life.

What was he doing up there? Go to him quickly. Go to him.

"Hal!" She called from the stairs.

No answer.

She called again as she hurried up the hall to the door of her room. He must have heard her. Why didn't he answer?

Someone was in there, padding stealthily about. He hadn't slipped away then. Just trying to frighten her. Doing it on purpose.

She stood outside the door, a tense little figure in black. Very angry.

"You needn't think I don't hear you." She raised her voice sharply. "When you want to talk sensibly, you'll find me downstairs."

Still no answer.

What would her mother think if she came back and found her here, and in such a state? The thought of her mother and of Morrison drove her frantic. "I might have known you were bluffing as usual," she flung as a final taunt, and with bitterness in her heart she turned to go.

What was that! A muffled report, and then silence spreading and spreading through her, through the house. She was part of that awful stillness—stricken without power to move.

Must open the door. Open it.

"Oh, my God!—oh, my God—Hal!—oh, God!" She stumbled across the room.

He lay by the window, horribly big and dark under the bright chintz curtains.

No, not this as an end! Not this.

He was looking at her, his poor eyes beseeching as she crouched beside him, trying to lift him, trying——

"Sorry, didn't mean to—thought I'd scare you—thing went off—" His poor voice growing fainter and fainter. "Don't cry, old girl—jolly well deserve it—beastly bungling—my last——"

Call him back. Call him—"Hal—Hal!"

But he had gone from the house without her. Just as he said he would. Just as he said——

THE END

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
00012670989